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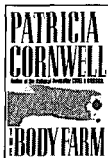
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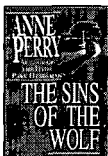


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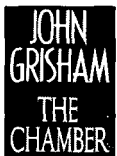
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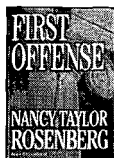
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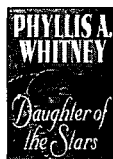
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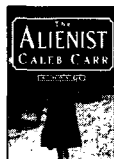
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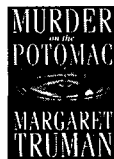
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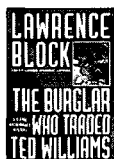
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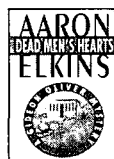
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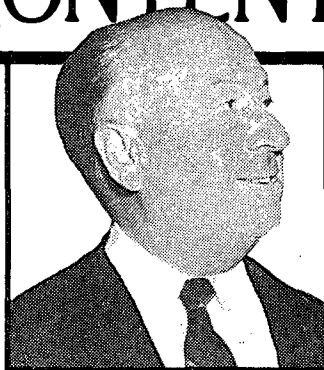
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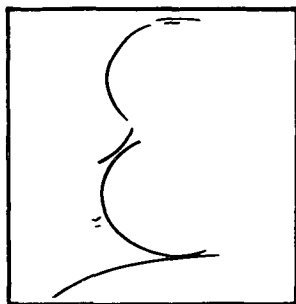
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*Cover by Steven Assel*

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**A**bout a year ago, in AHMM's December 1993 issue, we published a story called "Nobody Wins" by Charles Ardai. We are pleased to let you know that the story has been nominated for a Shamus Award for Best P.I. Short Story of 1993, given by the Private Eye Writers of America (PWA). The PWA awards will be announced at Bouchercon in October; we will bring you the complete list of nominees and winners in all categories in our February 1995 issue.

In the meantime, of course, we'll keep our fingers crossed. Mr. Ardai has written ten stories for us starting with "From Zaire to Eternity" in 1989 (about a mysterious Afri-

can diamond) and including such varied tales as "The Balancing Man," which defies description but has to do with an old man on a tightwire in an old barn; "The Investigation of Things," set in Sung Dynasty China about A.D. 1000; and "Carmine and the Christmas Presence," the story of a woodcarver and a brush with magic, in 1992. He published his first story in EQMM when he was seventeen.

Ken Lester's "A Boy Named Tzu" is his second story for AHMM, the first having been "Dance of the Hours" way back in 1962. He's been doing other things in the interim, but tells us that once in 1969, while checking into a hotel in Geneva where he was to present an air

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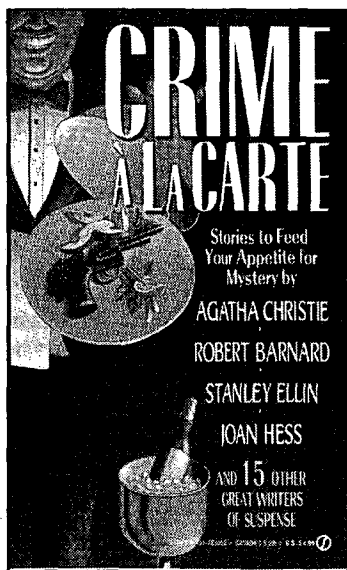
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safety seminar, he was startled to hear, coming over French radio in the lobby, the French announcer saying, "... *la Danse des Heures, par Ken Lester,*" followed by an adaptation of his story. An amazing coincidence, *n'est-ce pas?*

We have four new authors to welcome this time, who bring us four first stories. Frank Snyder, author of "The Slump," is an attorney in rural New York who took up the practice of small town law recently after having been a partner in a large law firm in Washington, D.C. His most unusual cases, he tells us, "include trips to the Greenland ice cap for a government investigation of the Distant Early Warning System and representing the International Human Rights Law Group before the U.S. Supreme Court in a case involving the deportation of a convicted IRA terrorist." His previous publications were such legal articles as "Employer Withdrawal from Multiemployer Bargaining." "The Slump," we promise, is a whole lot more fun.

Bobby Lee, author of "The Domino Drug Bust: A Love Story," has also written professionally, but also only nonfiction. He says, "I am (in order of importance): (1) a hillbilly from the Ozarks; (2) a country music fan madly in love with Reba; (3) a Ph.D. in educational psy-

chology who loved teaching and hated being a teacher." He has taken up writing full time now, for which we, at least, are glad; "The Domino Drug Bust" is a delight.

Nancy Bartholomew, author of "Dead in the Water," is a psychiatric social worker in private practice. She presently lives near Atlanta but grew up in Pennsylvania. "I began writing the songs I sang in little honky-tonks around Philadelphia, while in college. I also wrote poetry and short stories that were published in the college literary supplement and yearbook. I returned to writing after the birth of my second son. It was merely a case of write or go crazy." Like her characters in this story, she sometimes goes fishing.

Maude Miller, author of "Out of Order," is a registered nurse and a former teacher who says that she "won some money in a local writing contest (sponsored by, of all things, a casino in Nevada), and that got me started." She lives in Idaho, where she grew up, and has "lived in Japan and traveled in the Orient and Europe, England especially. . . . I started writing when my six-year-old students were out at recess; instead of using the old excuse of not having time to write, I first learned to quickly refocus my attention

(continued on page 190)



# RUTH RENDELL THE CROCODILE BIRD

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# Singing Lessons

by Sherrard Gray

“**S**houldn't we keep that kid out of here?” said Corporal Hanley. “We don't need some twelve-year-old poking around.”

Without thinking, Bunk Cummins nodded. Temple Buchanon's body had just been removed from the parlor of the old farmhouse where she lived and gave voice lessons, and the M.E. and state lab people had left. He was staring at the bloodstains on the corner of the piano, not really seeing them.

Bunk looked at his new patrolman. This was Jeff Hanley's second week on the job. He'd been a diesel mechanic in Elizabethville for seven years, had gotten tired of that, and had just graduated from the police academy in Pittsford. Basically he seemed a decent guy, might even make a good officer someday. In the meantime, though, he was pretty green around the gills, and Bunk had been spending a lot of time breaking him in.

“Hey!” Hanley waved his hand at the young girl standing in the doorway. Bony elbows

poked out under a pink Cata-mountain T-shirt, knobby knees showed under blue shorts. “Didn't you see that ribbon we put up outside? You're not supposed to cross it.”

The girl stared at him and turned away.

“I need some fresh air,” said Bunk. “Here, take this kit, see if you can find any prints the staties might have missed.” He stepped outside onto the freshly mown lawn. The warm sun felt good, gave him a fleeting sense that even in the midst of tragedy life goes on, the world continues to turn, the sun to shine. Across the drive and beyond a low snake-rail fence stood another house. He saw a white-haired head in the window watching them. Maddy Dufour, the neighbor who'd found the body earlier that morning. Two hours ago he'd taken her jumbled call. “Temple Buchanon . . . lying on the floor . . . all twisted up. . . .” He would walk over shortly and question her.

“I'm sorry,” said a voice to one side of him. “I didn't mean to sneak in or anything.”



"THERE'S THAT KID AGAIN," SAID JEFF. "MAYBE WE OUGHT TO SWEAR HER IN AS A DEPUTY."

*Illustration by Donald Cook*

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It was the girl again, standing outside the ribbon and holding onto a balloon-tire bike. She looked twelve, thirteen at the most. He walked over.

"Did you know Miss Buchanan?"

The girl nodded vigorously. "I live like half a mile from here. In that brown trailer by the pig farm?"

He knew the trailer. Had seen a rather blowsy-looking woman outside the last time he drove by.

"Temple was..." Tears trickled down the girl's face. "She was giving me voice lessons. Wouldn't let me pay for them. 'Course I probably couldn't have. My daddy was killed in a logging accident ten years ago, and Mom, well, she doesn't make a lot. We get food stamps," she added a little defiantly.

"Nothing wrong with that. A lot of people need food stamps."

A small grin broke out on the tearstained face. "Thanks. I think—" the girl blushed and looked down at her sneakers "—I think I like you. My name's Tracy, by the way. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"When did it happen?"

Should he share information with a twelve-year-old? Something about her, though, looked

older than twelve, much older. Some kids grow up fast in this vale of tears. "The M.E. estimated around eight last night. She'll have a more accurate estimate after she does an autopsy. You know what an M.E. is?"

Tracy thought a minute. "Murder expert?"

Bunk went back inside where Hanley was dusting the piano bench for prints. "I'm going to check with Mrs. Dufour," he said. He looked at the throw rug scrunched up on the floor. "Looks like Miss Buchanan put up a fight."

"Not much of one, judging from the size of her. She couldn't have weighed over a hundred pounds. Dammit anyway."

"What's wrong?"

"Why does it have to be such a nice person? She gave voice lessons to my niece. Turned that girl around. Before she took lessons, Sonja was overweight, moped around, you were lucky to get six words out of her and none of them very pleasant. Now she's cheerful, says 'Hi!', and is talking about being an actress. The woman had—what is that word? You know, where you have something special that makes people follow you?"

"Charisma?"



"That's it. Temple Buchanon had it."

The old lady was watching him when he came up the walk. He knew a little about her, knew something about a lot of people in Elizabethtown, pop. 2,000, where he'd lived all his life and been chief of the police department the past eight years. Her place had been a dairy farm, but following her husband's death fifteen or so years ago, she'd sold off some of the land to Temple. The going price then had been two hundred and fifty an acre, now it was two thousand. Beside the house stood a swaybacked red barn that still gave off a smell of chaff and dried manure and old wood. A dozen chickens strutted outside the barn, lorded over by a huge black and white rooster.

The face in the window disappeared as he mounted the steps, the door opened.

"It's getting to where a body's not even safe living in the country. Come on in." Mrs. Dufour was a large, buxom woman in her mid-seventies. He'd seen her mowing her own lawn—and not with a riding mower, either—and once when he went by she was on her roof in a pair of coveralls knocking the soot out of the chimney with a logging chain. She led him into the

living room, pointed to an overstuffed wingback chair, and sat on a horsehair couch. "I hope I never see a sight like that again. When I didn't see any sign of life over there by nine, I called her on the phone. There wasn't any answer, but her car was there. So I went over and . . ." Mrs. Dufour grimaced and was silent for a long moment. "I probably should've called you folks and let you discover the body. Do you know yet when it happened?"

"Around eight last night, we think. You're the only house nearby, Mrs. Dufour. The only house with a view of her driveway."

"Can you believe this?"

"Believe what?"

"I spend a lot of time settin' in the window just pondering things and watching. Not much goes on around here that I don't know about, and then, when something really big happens, naturally it has to happen on a Wednesday night, which is bingo night at the Legion." The old lady shook her head. "Maybe it's a good thing I wasn't to home, I might have heard the poor thing scream." She shuddered and looked down at her work-worn hands. When she finally looked up again, she said, "Love turned sour."

He waited.

"Hob Chaney. Mowed her lawn, took care of her garden. For a while there, he'd go inside the house, stay an hour or so, come strutting back out with a big, satisfied grin. Made me sick, it did, a nice lady like Temple teaming up with the likes of Hob, and he being married. If you can call that a marriage. Anyway, a month ago it stopped. He kept mowing her lawn, but he quit going inside. Didn't look happy, either. Scowling all the time. I think she broke off and it just kept gnawing on him until . . ." Mrs. Dufour's voice trailed off, she wriggled a hand indicating someone going off the deep end.

The bale missed him by less than a foot. It sailed past his face so close he felt the breeze on his cheek, a piece of chaff on his eyelid. He heard a thump as it landed twenty feet below in the half-filled mow.

"Oh God," he heard Hob Chaney say, "I almost beamed the chief of police." Hob and Everett McAllister were throwing bales off the back of Everett's pickup into a dusky bay below. "Just a sec, Bunk, and we'll have this done."

The two finished unloading, and Everett backed the truck down the barn bridge.

"Ev's wife told us the news about an hour ago," said Hob

as he and Bunk stepped outside the barn onto the ramp. He was a broad-shouldered man with a weathered face that now wore a beseeching look. "I'll do everything I can to help. Hanging would be too good for whoever killed her."

"Hob."

"Huh?"

"I've got to ask some questions, and you're not going to like all of them. You worked for Temple, you knew her pretty well."

"Come on, Bunk, you don't think . . ."

Cummins shook his head. "I don't think you did it, but I still have to know where you were around eight last night."

Hob leaned against the barn door. "I'm in some hot water now."

"Seeing someone you shouldn't?"

"That's about the size of it. Gina Dobson. Actually, I was waiting for her at her house; she was still working down at the nursing home. Okay, once in a while I pick a flower I ain't supposed to. What the heck, Val hasn't let me touch her in ten years, I'm only human. Does all this have to come out?"

"No. One more question." Bunk sighed, looked out over a field of timothy and dandelion waving in the breeze like a yellow curtain. A pair of ravens

swooped overhead, making raucous calls. This was the part of police work he could do without: posing nosy questions to people he knew.

"You're not going to like this question either, but did you and Temple have anything going?"

"Me and Temple?" The handyman's face reddened. "Are you kidding? She was a real lady. She had better things to do than fool around with a bum like me."

"You were seen going into her house for an hour or so at a time, and then suddenly it stopped."

Hob's jaw tightened. "That Dufour woman's got a nose longer than my arm. I was taking singing lessons."

The chief stared at him.

"Go ahead, laugh. You won't believe this, but when I was a kid in Proctorsville, I used to sing in school musicals. More fun than a barrel of monkeys. I even got the notion I might go on the stage and become another Caruso." Hob chuckled at himself. "I could've always gotten a part singing 'Pass the ketchup,' something simple like that. I mean I do have a voice. But life didn't turn out that way. Had to make a living right off, and so here I am, throwing hay bales and dreaming." The big man turned,

looked behind them into the dark barn with shafts of golden light slanting through cracks in the boards. "I knew what a popular teacher Temple was and last fall got it into my head to take some lessons from her. I had to do something, Bunk, I was in a rut. The same thing day in and day out, mowing lawns, digging up water lines, always driving other people to the airport so they could fly off to Timbuktu and have a grand time. But when Val realized how much fun I was having, she put a stop to the lessons. Said she'd leave me if I kept going."

"It's that kid snooping around again," said Corporal Hanley.

"I wouldn't call that snooping. I think she misses Temple." Bunk and his rookie were at Temple Buchanan's again the next morning, trying to determine whether anything had been stolen. There was no sign the house had been ransacked for money and valuables. They'd found a small jade and ebony inlaid box half full of jewelry, and in a desk drawer over three hundred dollars in cash. "Look, she's sitting under that tree crying."

Jeff stepped off the chair he'd been using to inspect the top

shelf of a glass-fronted curio cabinet. "This hasn't been my week. Monday my car throws a rod, Tuesday Tamsen and I break up, and now this murder. Which has to happen five days after I join the force. Whoever killed her could've at least waited till I'd gotten my feet wet."

But Bunk was only half listening, he was at the screen door watching Tracy sitting on a bench under the sugar maple staring blankly at her sneakers. Her puppy squatted on the ground at her feet. She looked up as he stepped outside and with the heel of her hand wiped her cheeks.

"Losing a good friend hurts, doesn't it?" he said. "What's the dog's name?"

"Pepper. He's been sort of lonely ever since our cat got run over last week. Can I call you Bunk? I mean . . . I don't know, I sort of feel like I've known you a long time."

"Call me anything you want but late to dinner."

She looked at him but didn't laugh.

"Tracy, do you have any idea who could've done that to Temple?"

"Gosh no. Who would want to do something like that to her? It must've been a stupid robber."

"We found some money in a drawer. He, or she, didn't take that. Had Temple quarreled with anyone that you knew about?"

"Oh sure. Her sister in Chicago. She thought Temple was, you know, a hick. Living in the country like this. Said Temple should move to the city and make a name for herself."

"Anyone else? How about boyfriends?"

"Oh boy." Tracy gave a crooked smile. "That was one thing about Temple. She picked some real losers. Said so herself. That was the only dumb thing about her, she kept picking the wrong guy. Let's see, there was this tall, skinny guy, an actor, he lived with her a couple of months. Something St. John, I can't remember his first name. He was kinda creepy-looking, but I don't think he'd hurt a fly." The girl lifted her head suddenly. "Wait a minute, there was a guy, Chico. Chico McAllister. Drove a pulp truck. He got mad at her once, said he'd break both her arms if she didn't quit playing the piano when he was watching football."

"Hmm."

"Bunk?"

"What's that?"

"I need to know something. Was it fast for Temple? Did she suffer?"



"I don't think so. My guess is she went quickly. Probably didn't feel it."

"Was she . . . was her head like bashed in?"

The chief shook his head. "Her face wasn't touched. As a matter of fact, she looked really nice. Like she was about to go somewhere. Had on some lipstick and eyeshadow."

Tracy looked at him, frowning. "Are you sure about the makeup?"

"Of course I am."

"She never wore makeup unless she was going out. And she almost never went out during the week." Tracy reached down and idly scratched her pup's ear. "There could be another reason for the makeup. She might have put it on if she was expecting a man visitor."

For the second time in less than a minute, Bunk said, "Hmm."

"Come on," said Chico. "You have to be kidding. You don't think I'd do something like that?"

They'd found him outside the trailer he shared with his wife and child, changing the oil filter on a stake-body truck. His hands were covered with black oil, and flecks of oil twinkled in his beard. A small gold earring dangled from one ear, and a red scar looped under his left eye.

"We don't think anything right now. We're just asking questions. I understand you went together for a while."

A pale, pregnant woman had come to the door of the trailer, and peering out between her legs was a little boy with a plastic duck.

"We went together for maybe a year. Part of that time I lived with her, yeah. Everyone knows it. My wife knows it. She was a nice lady, I can't think who'd do this. You think I did it?"

"We haven't come to any conclusions yet," said Hanley, while Bunk grimaced. "The investigation is in the preliminary stage."

"Yeah?" Chico looked at him. "Look, I may be a little rough around the edges, but I don't go in for killing people. Ain't that right, Charman?" He turned toward the woman standing now on the trailer's porch. Behind her the boy's eyes were big as silver dollars. "I may be rough but I ain't evil, ain't that right?"

A sudden smile blossomed on the woman's face. "You're sweet," she called to him.

"See that? Who would do this? Maybe something to do with land. I knew she was worried about a developer setting up something next door. Every

chance she got, she'd pick up more land."

Hanley was taking notes.

"Thanks," said Bunk. "If you think of anything else, let us know."

"Excuse me," said Hanley, "but we have a report that you once threatened her."

"Huh?" The logger stared at the young cop, and he didn't look happy. "Didn't you used to work at Barcomb Motors?"

Hanley grinned. "Got tired of eating grease and losing fingernails. We were told you once threatened to break both Temple's arms if she kept playing the piano during football games."

"Who told you that?" Chico dropped onto his haunches, kneaded his forehead leaving an oily smear. "Maybe I did say that." He glanced up at the sky. "If I did, I'll answer for it someday." He stood, a distant look in his eye. "That was the old days when football meant something to me. Sure, I still like the game, but not like that any more." He gave Bunk a searching look. "Did I really say that? Maybe I've learned something since then after all."

"There's that kid again," said Jeff as they pulled up to the curb outside the police station after investigating a report of a vicious dog. Tracy was riding

her bike up and down the sidewalk. "She doesn't let up. Maybe we ought to swear her in as a deputy and let her conduct the investigation. You and I don't seem to be getting anywhere."

Bunk climbed out of the car. "How's it going, Tracy?"

The girl produced a weak smile. "I don't know. I've got another voice teacher. Sabrina Moffat. She called right after I saw you last time and suggested I start up with her. I've had one lesson already."

"Do you like her?"

"Not much. She's not very friendly, and she's super strict. If you're five minutes late, that's too bad, you don't get any extra time. Temple used to give me extra time unless another student was waiting."

"Interesting." Hanley stood behind Bunk. "Sabrina called that niece of mine who was a student of Temple's. Pretty pushy lady."

Later that afternoon, Bunk and Jeff went to Ms. Moffat's dark, musty house on Depot Street in town. A student was trilling inside, her voice scooting up and down the scales like a rabbit.

They went in as the student, a young woman with dark eyes and a brisk stride, was leaving.

Hanley looked after her and said softly to himself, "Hey."

Sabrina, six feet tall, square-jawed, glared at him. Reluctantly she let the two into the vestibule.

"You've taken on a lot of new students, haven't you?" said Bunk.

"Isn't that my business?"

"A lot of Temple's students."

Sabrina's bluegreen eyes narrowed. "Just what are you implying?"

"Where were you around eight night before last?" said Jeff.

"I don't like any of these questions," said Sabrina. "It so happens, I was home, reading a book." She looked pointedly at Jeff. "Something you probably don't do very often yourself."

"That's right, I can't read. Can someone vouch for the fact that you were home at that time?"

"My elkhound. But I don't think she'd want to talk to you gentlemen. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot to do."

"Nice lady," said Jeff as they went down the steps toward their Crown Victoria. "I wonder how long my niece will last taking lessons with her."

"I hear there's going to be an auction at Temple's place," said Tracy, pedaling up to Bunk outside the police station. He

was getting into his patrol car on his way to investigate a nighttime burglary at the Rite Way Sports Shop. "I wonder who'll buy that painting Temple had? It's worth a small fortune."

"Painting?"

"It hung in the little bedroom at the back of the house. She kept it there so most people never saw it. I liked it because there's a kitty in it. A French painter. Vooleur? Voolez? Something like that."

Bunk still had a key to the house. On the way to the Rite Way, he let himself in and went to the small bedroom and stood looking at an empty hook and a blank square on the wall.

“Can you turn that noise down, Jeff? I can't think straight.”

"Come on, chief, chill out. This is the Grateful Dead. Loosens you up, helps you think." Jeff turned the radio off. "What would I do without music? Like a shot in the arm when I'm low. I've been thinking of all the women I've dated the past two years. Do you know how many that's been?"

"Can I count that high?"

"Six. And each time I think, hey, this could be it. And then something happens. I'm start-

ing to worry, Bunk. Twenty-five and not getting any younger."

Bunk patted his assistant on the shoulder. "Hang in there, it'll happen. It'll happen when you least expect it. It'll happen *because* you least expect it."

"Come again?" Jeff frowned, but behind the frown was a glint of understanding.

"What'd you think of Sabrina Moffat?"

"A lot of anger in that woman. I got the feeling she thought she should have been a great opera star, and instead here she is in Podunk, Vermont, giving singing lessons. And not many of them until Temple died. She scares away students. My niece messed up a high C her first lesson, and Sabrina groaned. The poor kid was almost in tears. Personally, though, I don't think it was her. I got my money on Hob Chaney, the jilted lover."

"He says he was taking singing lessons."

Corporal Hanley laughed for half a minute. "Come on, Bunk. The guy's got a voice like Kermit the Frog. He's been in trouble before, too, assault and battery. Remember when Hank Harrington complained about Hob mowing over some flowers, and Hob lifted him off the ground with one hand like he was a starving cat? Someone's

knocking at the door. That kid again. Have you deputized her yet? Okay, I'll be nice."

Tracy walked in with a wad of gum in her cheek. "Hi, Bunk. Hi, Jeff."

On a hunch, Bunk said, "Do you think Hob and Temple were more than just friends?"

Tracy stopped chewing and stared at him. "You mean were they . . . more than just friends?" She shook her yellow curls. "No way. He wasn't her type. Matter of fact, I don't think she'd been real tight with anyone since Chico. And that actor I told you about."

"St. John, right? You said he wouldn't hurt a fly." Bunk was getting the uneasy feeling that maybe he should've tried harder to locate St. John. In fact, he hadn't tried at all. There had been enough more promising suspects to keep him and Jeff busy.

"Mr. La-di-da," said Tracy. "You know—" She lifted her chin, stretched out a bare, skinny arm, and pretended to flick ashes from a cigarette holder.

Corporal Hanley laughed. "Hey, that's not bad. The next Julia Roberts."

"He talked with a phony British accent," went on Tracy, trying to hide a pleased smile. "And knew everything. Was always quoting Shakespeare,



talking about kings, queens, art. He was into painting in a big way."

Corporal Hanley stared at the twelve-year-old and said nothing. Not even a wisecrack.

"Well, if it ain't my old friend, Bunk Cummins. And Jeff Hanley. How you fellows doing?" Chief Achilles Boudreau of the Ravensburg P.D. kept his feet on his desk, drumming a gold pen on one knee. The desk was strewn with papers, some of which were weighted down with a pair of handcuffs. "Should I take my feet off the desk and try to look busy?"

"Naw, that's all right," said Bunk.

"Actually, I am busy. In fact, that's why I've got my feet up on the desk. There's so much to do I don't know where to start. So I sit here and tap the gold pen the town gave me for twenty years of service and stare out the window and wonder if life was always this complicated. Was it?"

"Do I look like a philosopher?"

Chief Boudreau's expression was world-weary but kind. Humanity still burned in his jowly seen-it-all face. "Actually, you do look like a philosopher. I've always thought..." His voice trailed off. "This a social call, Bunk?"

"Sprague St. John."

Boudreau dropped a foot off his desk, along with a stack of papers that planed out over the floor.

"The Temple Buchanon case."

Boudreau's other foot came down. He stood up. "You have to be joking. The guy's an actor. You know—" Achilles laid a hand against his chest and declaimed "'—To be or not to be, that there's the question.'"

"I think you make a better cop than actor, Achilles."

"You do?" Boudreau pretended to be crestfallen. Or maybe he wasn't pretending. "So ole Twinkle Toes is a suspect?"

"He lived for a short while with Ms. Buchanon. But what's really got us going is a valuable painting she had in her house. We just discovered it's missing."

Someone whistled behind the two Elizabethville officers, and they turned. A young woman in uniform stood with a Coke in hand. Her hat was off, showing a head of taffy-colored curls. She smiled and stuck out her hand.

"Janet Russo. Achilles and I were in St. John's apartment just a month ago. If you can call it an apartment. What a hole. I don't think a woodchuck could

live there. We arrested him on a charge of check kiting."

When the man in pajamas and slippers opened the door to the three of them, a blend of unkind smells—dirty socks, moldering bread, Kitty Litter in serious need of attention—wafted past them.

"Three cops this time? I must be moving up in the world; last time it was only two. Look, all I did was cash a phony check for two hundred bucks. Do I get the chair? I've already been booked, my hearing date's set, what else is there?"

"Murder," said Bunk.

It was like he'd hit Sprague St. John in the stomach. The man's eyes bulged, his stringy white hair seemed to stiffen, and the blood left his face as if a plug had been pulled. St. John looked at Corporal Russo. "Who are these people?"

"Officers Cummins and Hanley from the Elizabethtown Police Department." Russo showed St. John her search warrant, and the three stepped into the room. "Oh, a kitty." Russo was looking at a striped orange and white kitten curled on the rumped bed. The cat gave the three a worried look and like a cricket sprang onto a night table beside the bed and from there to the top of a carved

oak wardrobe. A small cloud of dust rose from the wardrobe.

In a low voice, Hanley said, "Let's make this quick or I'm gonna pass out."

"Do you mind if I ask what you're looking for?" said St. John. "Sir!" he yelled at Hanley, who was peering behind a wall hanging. "That's an extremely fragile Gobelin tapestry. Please do not handle it."

Hanley held up his hands. "No need for a seizure. Just checking." He went to a Chippendale bureau across the room. Most of the furniture was old, elegant, and in serious disrepair. The style of the apartment was sublime poverty. "Well, well, what've we got here?" Jeff had pulled out the bureau from the wall, a crumpled beret and stack of playbills spilling onto the floor. He drew out something sheathed in newspaper, unwrapped a painting of a girl standing by a window looking out at a river. On the windowsill was sprawled a tabby cat.

St. John's laugh was rumbling and nervous. "I'm flattered you covet my work."

"Huh?" said Hanley.

There was a muffled giggle from Russo.

"He says he's flattered you want something he painted," said Bunk.

Hanley bent over the painting and squinted at a signature in the lower right-hand corner. "His name Édouard Vuillard?" As Hanley was straightening up, St. John made a dash for the door, the skirts of his pajama top billowing out behind him and one slipper flying. Lean and long-legged, he was halfway to the door before Bunk realized what was happening.

"Whoa there, fellow," said Russo sticking out a foot. St. John's arms flew out, and he hit the floor and slid on his stomach like a body surfer. There was a *whack* as his head hit the base of the door.

"Ouch," he said. Slowly he got to his feet. Bunk snapped cuffs around his wrists, and Russo read him the Miranda Act.

St. John gave a scornful laugh when she told him he didn't have to say anything until he'd seen his attorney. "I've always thought that was absurd. I don't have an attorney, for one thing. Unless you count the one the state's assigned to me. You want to know something else, young lady?"

Russo eyed him skeptically, probably expecting a sexist remark.

"I killed Temple Buchanon."

"You don't have—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I don't have to talk about it until I can lie to my lawyer. The fact of the matter is—" St. John stopped, a tear appeared on his lower lid. "Don't laugh, good people, but the aging cynic is actually remorseful for what he's done. Excuse me, if you will. I'm afraid a rather lachrymose situation is developing." He turned stumbling toward the bed and sat down, and for two minutes sobbed like a baby.

"Well," he said finally. "I haven't cried like that in twenty years. Yes, I killed the woman I once loved. Maybe still do." He told how, two weeks ago, he went to see Temple. He was desperate for money, hadn't had a part in over eight months. He pleaded with her to take him back in. "I told her the usual baloney about turning over a new leaf, that from now on things would be different. She declined. I insisted. We were standing in the living room. I shouted that she was a coldhearted, barren woman, and she lashed back. Said I was a failed actor and a failed human being and if I didn't leave she would call the police. She started shoving me toward the door, pushing *me*, the great Sprague St. John, America's equivalent of Sir Laurence Olivier—" here followed a despairing laugh

"—and that's when I lost it. I took her by the shoulders—" He closed his eyes and let out an anguished groan. "Afterwards, realizing I couldn't sink any lower than I already had, I took this painting, which is worth probably forty thousand—if you can find a way to unload it. And there you have it."

There was silence in the room. Something big and hissing—a pulp truck or oil tanker—rumbled by on the street below. The cat peered down from its perch, its bony shoulders hunched over its head.

Sprague St. John stood with his cuffed hands in front of him. "Lead on, Macduff."

"Hi, guys," said Tracy, skipping down the steps of the trailer she lived in with her mother. Bunk and Jeff had just

turned into the dirt drive and stepped out of their Crown Victoria. "Did you find that actor?"

"We did," said Jeff. "Thanks to you."

The girl looked at him.

"You want to join the department?"

Tracy grinned. "No, thanks. I'm going to be a music teacher."

"We've got something for you," said Bunk. He reached into the back seat, took out a gray pet carrier, and opened the gate. A marmalade cat stepped out, looked around, and went straight to Tracy.

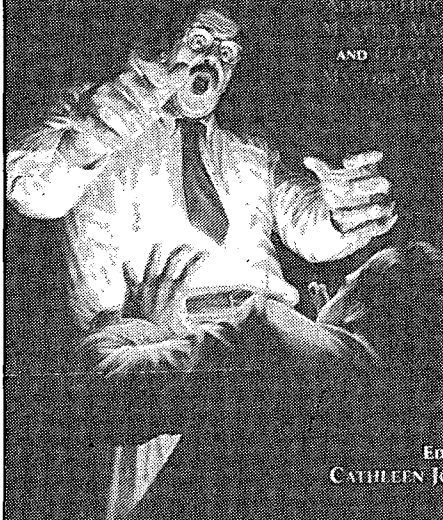
"Look at that," said Jeff with a sigh. "Love at first sight. Do you think that'll ever happen to me?"

Bunk was watching Tracy as she picked up the cat. He started to shrug and then stopped himself. "Sure it will, Jeff. When you least expect it."

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# The Slump

## by Frank Snyder

**I**t was a Sunday in Fort Smith, at the end of a double-header which I went 0 for 9 and struck out five times off this Dominican name of Rodriguez, that I decided to kill Jiggs Holloway.

Jiggs was the manager of the Joplin Jets of the Class A Tri-State League, the Tri-States being Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. Class A? Well, it's one of the levels of the minor leagues. Triple-A is the highest, then Double-A, then A. Below that is the rookie leagues and the instructional leagues. Basically, Class A is where you send your young talent to get experience, so that eventually we will move up to the show, which is what we call the big leagues. This means that your basic minor league manager, when he is nurturing young talent, is supposed to be helpful. What my girlfriend Janice, who works at the Crisis Intervention thing they have back in Eufaula, calls "supportive."

Well, Jiggs was not supportive. He was, if you will excuse the expression, about the foul-

est, meanest, evillest S.O.B. ever to spit tobacco juice on his cleats. He was short, dumpy, and bald, with little ferret eyes and pink lips in his doughy face and the kind of snaggly brown teeth you get when you dip snuff for about fifty years.

And he loved to ride me. When I got promoted to the Jets last year, after having done real good in the rookie league (.304 with five home runs), he started to get on me, calling me "Hayseed" and "Rube," saying I was dumb. One game when I misjudged a fly ball, which anyone would have done the way it was hit and coming right out of the sun so you couldn't see it, he tore into me like dogs on a possum, which I felt was an overreaction, if that's the word.

Not a day went by that he didn't say something to rag me. Even when I started good in the first few games this year, he was always on me about something, not paying attention, or being slow, or missing a sign, or not being in position.

It was bad enough when I was doing okay. But when the slump started, it was pure hell.



The slump? I don't want to talk about it. Baseball is a streaky game. All ballplayers have slumps, even Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron had weeks and months when they could not hit a barn if they were standing inside it. Sometimes you go 9 for 15 with three home runs, sometimes you go 0 for 15. It tends to even out over a season. But the slump I went into at the beginning of May was the worst one I had ever been in. The worst I had ever *seen* anyone in, if you want to know the truth. On the twenty-ninth of April I went 2 for 4 with three r.b.i.'s at Cape Girardeau and was hitting .285, but after that, as my dad says, the wheels came off. From then to the middle of May I went 1 for 25, and Jiggs settled down to make my life miserable.

It's a funny thing. When a ballplayer is in the groove, the ball looks as big as a basketball when it comes up to the plate, and the fielders fall down running after it when you've hit it. When you're in a slump, the ball looks like a BB and the bat feels like it's the wrong shape. When you swing, you miss. When you don't miss, you hit it right at somebody.

It gets to you. You keep thinking about it, and pretty soon you can't think of anything else. You can't eat. You

can't sleep. Nobody in the clubhouse wants to talk to you because they're afraid it's contagious, like leprosy or cancer or something, and they don't want to get too close to it. Reporters write about it, finding it funny, like that peabrain from Neosho who wrote that column which everyone thought was so humorous, which all I can say is if he's so good why is he working for some rat bag paper in Neosho, Missouri?

It was the most awful time of my life. And every day of the slump, Jiggs was on me like flies on horse manure. Every game I'd come back to the dug-out after going 0 for 3, 0 for 4, he'd swear at me, using language I'd be ashamed to repeat. Saying I was stupid, shiftless, no-talent. Saying that I was a fairy, which anyone will tell you I am not, and you can ask Janice.

But swearing at me was better than when he decided to be sarcastic, making these snide comments that some of the guys would snigger at. Like, for example, he'd seen playgrounds with better swings. Or that if I wasn't going to use the bat, maybe he could borrow it to use as a doorstep. Or that with my talent maybe I ought to drive a schoolbus, 'cause I sure as heck would never hit anybody.

I was never very quick with backtalk, not like Scooter Kirby who is this smart-aleck black guy from Detroit who Jiggs doesn't mess with because he gets it back worse. Scooter used to try to get me to talk back to Jiggs, but I never could understand how he could think of stuff like that. So I mostly just had to take it.

By the beginning of June, that day we were in Fort Smith, I was a wreck. I'd slept maybe an hour the night before, and not at all the night before that. I was 3 for 57.

It was two out in the bottom of the ninth, we were down 6-1, nobody was on, and I was up. I had struck out four times already off that Dominican, and he got me swinging again on three pitches.

I walked back to the dugout, kicking the bat. Jiggs was standing there with a couple of the guys, grinning with those brown teeth. "That was quite a cut you took at that last pitch, Johnson," he said. "What was that, a slider?"

"It was a curveball," I said.

"Looked just a little bit low," he said.

"Uh-huh." It had bounced about two feet in front of the plate, if you want to be exact.

"You had quite a cut, though. If it had of been a couple of feet

closer, you might of actually nicked it! Ha, ha."

"Ha, ha," said Joey Scapetto, who is this second baseman who last time I checked nobody was confusing with Rogers Hornsby, but he's all the time sucking up to Jiggs.

"I could feel the wind all the way over here," said Jiggs.

"Damn near took my cap off," said Joey.

"Ha, ha," said Jiggs. "That's a good one, Joey." He spat, the brown liquid dribbling down his jawl, and squinted up at me. "You know, Johnson, I been in professional baseball thirty-seven years. I seen some of the greats. I played with the Yankees, the Goddamned 1961 New York Yankees, the best team to ever have played the game. Now every day I come to the ballpark expecting to see the *worst* play I've ever seen in thirty-seven years, and I got to say you never disappoint me." He shook his head. "Man my age got to be thankful for the entertainment when he got to put up with ballplayers like you."

I couldn't think of anything to say. After a minute he said, "Get the hell out of here before I puke."

I trudged back to the clubhouse. Of course nobody said anything to me while they undressed. I was sitting there,

still in my uniform, staring at the floor and seeing in my mind this Rodriguez throwing BB's at me, thinking that I was now 3 for 66 and might never get a hit again, when Jiggs came strolling in. He stopped in front of me, puffing a little from the exertion of walking all the way from the dugout, which was maybe twenty yards away. Everybody looked over at Jiggs, and it got quiet.

"You know, Johnson," he said, "I suppose you are wondering why I left you in that last at-bat, when we were down 6-1 and you were the last out? And when that Dominican had already struck you out four times?"

I didn't say anything.

He looked around and grinned, his little eyes almost disappearing. "I left you in because the official Tri-State League record for being struck out in one game is five times. I wanted to give you the chance for the record, which I am happy to say you now share. I figured it was going to be the only batting record you'd ever get."

He laughed, and some of the other guys snickered a little, too, although I could tell some of them were embarrassed. Joey Scapetto laughed like he was Ed McMahon and it was

the funniest thing Johnny Carson ever said.

"The only record you'd ever get," Jiggs said again, enjoying the joke. "When you are back flipping burgers in Hooterville, or wherever you are from, you can remember that."

A red mist seemed to settle on me as I heard some of the guys laughing. At that moment, I knew I was going to kill him.

It is not so easy to kill somebody as it would seem to be from watching TV. I wanted to kill Jiggs, but I didn't want to get caught. I stayed up most of the night thinking about it, thinking about guns, and knives, and heavy objects, and drowning, and hanging, but none of them seemed any good. But on the bus to Grand Island the next day, Monday, it hit me.

Tuesday was a night game, so that morning I put on sunglasses, left the Best Western, and went downtown. It took a while for me to find what I was looking for, but I finally found it in this dingy little hardware and farm supplies place, where this old guy in a feed cap was sitting behind the counter. It was this old box sort of faded on one side and covered with dust. "Rat Poison," it said. "Contains Strychnine." Then I found a 7-

Eleven out on the highway where there was this Iranian clerk, which I did not know they had Iranians in Nebraska, and bought a can of the kind of snuff that Jiggs used. The clerk never looked up.

Back at the hotel, I opened the snuff can and dumped a quarter of it out, filling it up with the rat poison and shaking it up to mix it. The tobacco was dark brown and the rat poison was dark gray and you could hardly tell the difference. I poured the rest of the rat poison down the toilet and then stuffed the box in the dumpster behind the Best Western.

I knew from TV they always check on poison sales when somebody is poisoned, so I figured I would put them off the trail by waiting until we left Nebraska before I used it. I decided I would do it Friday when we were in St. Joseph, Missouri.

I went 0 for 3 that night, then 0 for 2 on Wednesday, Jiggs making some real clever remarks to me, which I didn't seem to mind so much when I thought about the can of snuff. He benched me Thursday night because the Islanders were pitching this kid Sanders who Jiggs knew I had hit real good in the past and might have got a hit off of.

On the bus that night Jiggs was talking for about the millionth time about the 1961 New York Yankees. I had looked it up, and I knew he had played only five games with those Yankees, after the September call-up, and had then gone to Syracuse the next year and got cut and then played four years in the Kansas City organization, hitting .212 for the Athletics in 1964. But he talked like he was best friends with Mantle and Maris and Berra and all those guys, hinting that old Whitey Ford wouldn't even get on the mound without he had Jiggs Holloway at shortstop.

Friday was a night game in St. Joe. Jiggs's uniform was too tight for him to keep things in the pockets, and everybody knew he always set his snuff can down next to his seat in the dugout. It was while he was watching the Saints take batting practice that I switched cans. It was easy.

Just before the National Anthem, I saw him take a huge pinch and stuff it into his cheek.

The game was awful. I was so jittery that I misplayed a pop fly in the top of the first that went for a double, then I almost missed the cutoff man. When I came back to the dugout, Jiggs said something to me that I

could barely hear. He was not looking good. In the second I was called out on strikes, hardly seeing the ball because I kept looking back at the dug-out. Jiggs did not say anything about it, though. He was looking queasy. In the fourth I made a bad throw that almost cost us a run, and in the fifth I got fooled real bad on a change-up and hit into a double play to kill a rally. In the seventh I looked in from the field and his seat was empty. I don't remember much after that.

Jiggs wasn't in the clubhouse when the game was over. Somebody said he was sick, but nobody knew anything. We took the bus back to the hotel.

In my room it suddenly came over me what I had done. I was brought up right, and I suppose I should have felt remorse or something, but actually I felt free, better than I had in a month, like somebody had lifted a semi that had been parked on top of me. I wanted to be alone, but I figured it was important to act natural and I wanted to find out about Jiggs, so I went down to the hotel bar with some of the guys.

I don't know what it was that night, but one beer and I was high. Two and I was floating on air. Laughing, giggling, even. The other guys were looking at me strange.

I was thinking I had to calm down when there was a sound behind me and a voice said, "Jeez, Johnson, you stunk worse than day-old turds today."

Now, I don't know if you ever watch those slasher movies on cable TV, the ones where the blonde thinks she's finished off the maniac killer when he suddenly pops up with a chainsaw. But it was like that.

It was Jiggs Holloway.

He looked a little unsteady and his face was the color of bathroom putty, but he was definitely alive.

"Hey, Jiggs," said someone. "You okay?"

"Guess so," he said. "I thought I was going to puke to death for a while there."

"You go to a doctor?"

"Nah. I feel okay now."

"Maybe it was something you ate," said Joey Scapetto.

"Maybe," said Jiggs. "Or maybe it was having to watch Johnson here screw up so bad out in the field. It would of made any real baseball man puke to see that." Joey and a couple others laughed.

"I bet you could use a drink," said Joey.

"I bet you are right, Joey," said Jiggs.

Everything sort of blurred after that. Later in my room I



tried to figure out what went wrong. Maybe I hadn't used enough rat poison. Or maybe he didn't swallow enough because he kept spitting the tobacco juice. Or maybe he was just too evil to die. I didn't know. It had scared me pretty bad.

I waited through the weekend, not playing Saturday and then going 0 for 3 Sunday with a walk, which Jiggs made a great deal over, saying that now that he had seen me on base he expected hell to freeze over any day. On Monday as usual we were on the bus, this time headed for Council Bluffs for a three-game series with the Bisons, that is Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

By Tuesday I had recovered from the shock, and I had thought of a new plan. I got the idea from a rerun of *Starsky & Hutch*. It would be an accident. That morning I put on the dark glasses and took a bus to the airport in Omaha, which is across the river from Council Bluffs. I went to the car rental counter, which I was surprised how much they charge to rent even little cars. I rented this little Ford Escort for about thirty dollars a day plus about fifty dollars more for taxes and insurance.

I drove the car out into the country where I found some

mud and drove through it back and forth a few times, and then smeared mud over the license plates, so you couldn't see the numbers.

The plan was simple. There's a bar across the street from the ballpark owned by an old guy named Sorenson who knew Jiggs from when they both played at Omaha in the American Association. Whenever we were in Council Bluffs, Jiggs would have a beer or two at Sorenson's bar before walking over to the park. I figured I would have the car ready, and when Jiggs crossed the street I would run him down. It would be a hit-and-run accident, but nobody would be able to I.D. the car because of the mud. The motel in Council Bluffs where the Jets stayed is only two blocks from the park, so I would just park the car on a side street, walk back to the motel, then join the last stragglers walking to the park. I could return the car the next day. Nobody would ever connect me with it.

So a little after four I was sitting in the Escort, a block down from the bar, wearing dark glasses and a University of Iowa hat, when the door of the bar opened and Jiggs came out.

I switched on the engine. My palms were sweating on the steering wheel, but my mind

was very cool. As he walked toward the street, I gunned the engine, and the little car jumped forward as fast as it could, which was faster than I supposed it could. Jiggs was looking the other way as he stepped off the curb. I had him dead in my sights.

Suddenly a baseball rolled out into the street, and a little kid, not more than ten or so and wearing a Bisons T-shirt, ran out after it. I swerved the wheel to the left as hard as I could and stomped on the brakes. The car skidded, shot across the line, and headed for the opposite curb. There was a group of old geezers standing there jabbering; they looked up and froze. I yanked the wheel back right. The car fishtailed like an Olympic skier, back wheels banging off the curb, and plowed straight into the passenger side of an oncoming Mercedes sedan. There was a terrible crash. I remember hitting this big pillow where the airbag exploded.

Next thing I knew guys came running up to the car. Jiggs was one of the first ones there. "Jeez," he said. "It's Johnson! You okay, boy?"

It was a good question. But everything seemed to be working. "Guess so," I said.

A portly man in a suit appeared in the window. "What

on God's earth were you doing?" he yelled. "Look what you've done to my car!" I looked over at the Mercedes, which didn't look so good. "Do you know who I am?" he yelled. "I am Myron W. Stevens!" And he proceeded to explain that he was a partner in a big Omaha law firm, and that he knew everyone who was worth knowing on both sides of the Missouri River and in Washington, too, and that he would personally see that he took every dime I had in the world and that I never drove a motor vehicle again as long as I lived. He was very eloquent about it, if that's the word I want.

Jiggs was laughing. "Jeez, Johnson," he said. "You finally hit something—and it turns out to be a lawyer's Mercedes!"

They took me in for observation to the hospital, which there was nothing wrong with me, but I didn't play that night. Next day Jiggs put me in, saying I was on a hot streak, and I went 0 for 3 before he pulled me for a pinch-hitter in the eighth.

The incident with the car had shaken me up, but if anything I hated Jiggs more than ever. I didn't even think about the slump any more; all I could think about was killing him. Thursday night he put me in as

a pinch-runner for the catcher, and I was thinking so much about him that I missed the hit-and-run sign and ran into a double play.

That night after the game we rode the bus back to Joplin for the start of a home stand, the Jets hosting Salina, Grand Island, and Sioux City.

I didn't play at all against the Tornados over the weekend, which we scored thirty runs in three games as Salina has the worst pitching in the league. I barely watched the games, thinking all the time about guns and knives and ropes and blunt objects and not seeing any way to do it that I wouldn't get caught. On Tuesday Jiggs decided to have me start, but it was against this phenom from Grand Island name of Crawford who was 9-0 with a 0.80 e.r.a., and we were shut out, me going 0 for 4 with two strikeouts. They called him up to Double-A next day.

I was like some kind of zombie during the next few games. I didn't play much, this guy Mendoza who was taking my place hitting pretty decent and Jiggs letting him play, which was okay because Mendoza was a pretty good guy.

The next Friday night after we had lost to Sioux City, I was back at my room at the Shangri-La Motor Lodge, which is

where most of us Jets live when we're at home in Joplin. I couldn't sleep and I turned on this movie on cable about a crazy kid who kills his parents, not the one with the kid in it from *Home Alone*, a different one. And then it hit me.

The perfect solution.

Saturday was a day game, twelve thirty start. Jiggs had Mendoza in for me again, he went 3 for 6 with a home run, which Wizniak their left fielder ought to have caught except he didn't time his jump right. It was a long game, almost three hours, the Sioux finally winning 10-7.

Back in the clubhouse most of the guys showered quick and headed out. By about four thirty there were only a few guys still around. And Jiggs Holloway had climbed into the whirlpool.

Our whirlpool in Joplin was a big galvanized metal tub that a man could sit upright in. It was for the players. But after a tough day of sitting on his butt and spitting tobacco juice, Jiggs liked to relax by sitting in the whirlpool and reading those *True Detective* magazines you see on the shelf at 7-Eleven stuck between *Monster Trucks Today* and *Real Inside Wrestling*. He was humming along to the big old AM-FM radio,

which was tuned to this country and western station from Neosho. I went into the whirlpool room. Jiggs was alone, his nose stuck in the magazine. I saw him spit into the water.

He looked up as I walked in. "Hey, Johnson," he said, "how you doing?"

"Fine," I said. I walked over to the radio.

"You got your bus ticket back to Hooterville yet? Way Mendoza is playing, you going to have a very short career. Ha, ha."

"It is Eufaula," I said, very slowly. "Eufaula, Alabama. That is where I am from. Not Hooterville."

"Ha," he said. "Same thing. You going to be back where you belong, performing unnatural acts with livestock and flipping burgers at the Dairy Queen."

I picked up the radio and looked straight at him. I suppose he saw something in my eyes, for he started to look a little nervous.

"Jiggs Holloway," I said, very slowly, "you have made my life miserable ever since I came to this club."

"It's not *me* who has not got a hit for two months," he said. "That is what is miserable."

"I done nothing to you, but you have rode me every chance you got."

"I was only ragging you. You dumb-ass hicks can't take a joke."

"Maybe not. But I am going to kill you anyway."

He saw the radio in my hand and he looked down at the water which was around his chest. "Oh my God," he said and he jumped up, the fastest I ever saw Jiggs move, but it was too late. I flung the radio into the water. There was a great splash.

Nothing happened.

For a minute the room seemed to swim. Then Jiggs was just standing there in the water. The radio made this bubbling sound and sank. Then I saw what happened. When I threw the radio, the plug came out.

Jiggs started to laugh. "Oh my, Johnson," he said, "that was a good one, that was. You really had me there for a minute."

He laughed and laughed. A crimson fog seemed to come down over my eyes.

"I did not think you had it in you," he said. "You will have to pay for the radio, but it was worth it. It was a real good joke. I'll have to tell the boys."

Everything was dark and red. Over next to the wall I saw a couple of bats the equipment manager had not put away. I

grabbed one and charged at him.

It was like everything was in slow motion. His head seemed to hang in front of me, eyes like raisins in a half-baked biscuit; it looked like a curveball that hadn't broke, hanging right out over the middle of the plate.

I swung the bat with all my might.

He screamed.

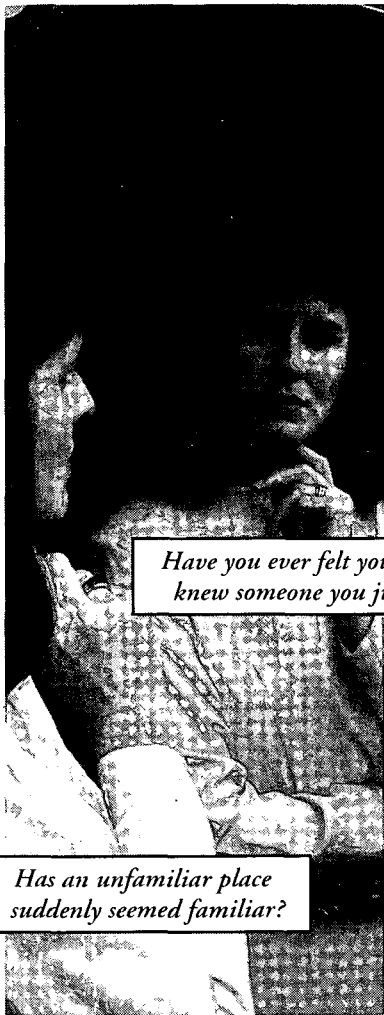
That's about all I remember. A second later a couple of guys

ran in; they grabbed me and took the bat away, although I don't think I resisted much. The last thing I remember seeing was Jiggs standing naked there in the tub, water still dripping off him. I heard him start to laugh.

"Missed me!" he was saying. "The stupid son of a bitch *missed* me! Went right over my head!" I never have seen anyone laugh that hard. "Missed me!"

It was the worst slump I have ever been in.

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# Out of Order

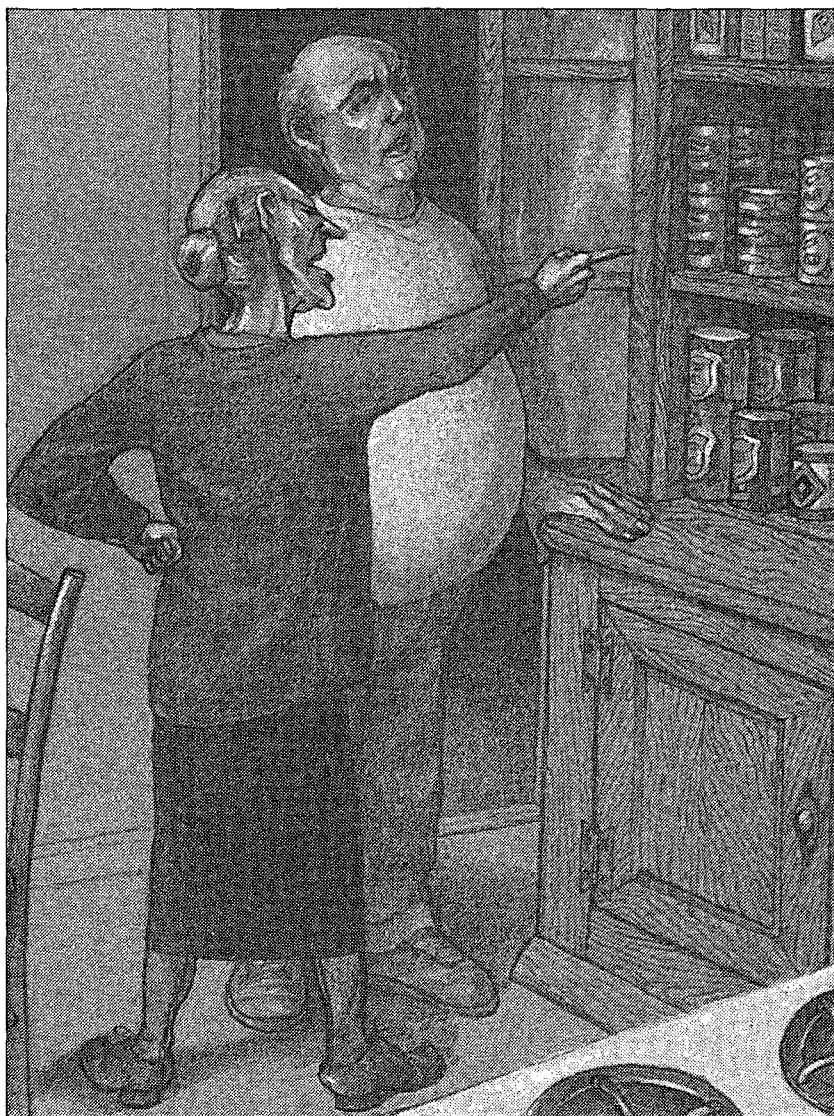
by Maude Miller

Someone had been in her flat. She knew this because the inlaid box on the telly had been turned. Instead of facing the armchair in front as it usually did, it now faced the bookshelves to the side. Miss Dewey had returned from the green-grocer's to find it so. In an ordinary flat, it would have been a matter of little concern, even passed by unnoticed. But in Miss Dewey's flat, well, nothing was ever out of order.

The items in her fridge were alphabetically organized, eggs and juice on the left, margarine and milk on the right. Her books were also shelved in alphabetical order by author, the tinned goods in the pantry likewise. She had an obsession for ABC order, the natural result of her many years as a schoolmistress in a primary school north of London. She hadn't liked her profession, and it was a great humiliation to her that she never became headmistress, but she had endured it until she could retire and collect her pension.

Miss Dewey had spent the better part of her spinsterhood in the company of whiny, simpering children always begging for the attention she was loath to give them. Such disgusting, runny-nosed little creatures with no reverence at all for order and tidiness. They were always making a mess, a mess that she was expected to pick up. It was nothing less than a miracle that she had survived it.

But now matters were quite different. She no longer had to pretend she liked children, or anyone else for that matter. She had let this small but well-equipped flat in a quiet, safe section of London, and no children were allowed in the building. It was the perfect situation for her orderly life, and she was grateful that she would never have any reason to leave. She finally had a home of her own, and she would never have to worry about children coming to visit. In fact, no one at all ever came to Miss Dewey's flat because she had no friends. Her appearance alone did not invite friendship, what with the steely gray hair pulled severely back into a tight bun, the hard, dark eyes, and the sharp-featured chin and nose that appeared hawkish because she was so thin. In combination



"JUST LOOK AT THIS!" SHE WAILED.

with her sharp tongue and harsh criticisms of almost everyone she came in contact with, it was not surprising that Miss Dewey had not had a true friend for well on fifty years. But, that was just as well, she told herself reassuringly. Friends were wont to make messes and whine for attention, just like those annoying students had done for so many years. She had spent forty years teaching so that she could escape those grim responsibilities and do as she pleased, without the bother and inconvenience of having to live with someone else in order to cut expenses. Miss Dewey had been forced to earn a pension, and she had wisely done so. It never occurred to her that she had chosen a profession she was ill-equipped for.

She had carefully selected this quiet, orderly block of flats. There were only four tenants in the building, approved of because they kept to themselves and had no children. There was an elderly couple to the side of her flat, a young single man above them, and a thirtyish single woman above her who had just recently moved in (all remaining nameless to Miss Dewey). They were necessarily quiet; she would have it no other way. She hoped they were neat, but she couldn't be sure of that because she had never entered their flats and didn't plan to. Except for Mr. Trainor, the owner of the building, who also took charge of the maintenance and management.

He and his sister lived at the rear of the building, and circumstances had compelled her to become more familiar with him than she cared to. Eyeing the incongruously placed inlaid box (she was careful not to move it because it was evidence), she knew she would have to speak to Mr. Trainor directly. Miss Dewey had been to the door of his flat on several occasions out of sheer necessity. First of all, she had no telephone. There was simply no need to go to the expense of having one installed, since no one would ever ring her, but sometimes she did need to use it. Mr. Trainor allowed her to use his, as she felt he should. Second, there were sometimes other matters that she had to draw to his attention.

"Someone has been in my flat, Mr. Trainor. Nosing about, I expect."

Mr. Trainor was a heavyset, fortyish man with a pleasant, ruddy face and a rapidly balding head. "And how do we know that, Miss Dewey?" He was by now painfully familiar with Miss Dewey's complaints, ranging from the petty (I was disturbed by the phonograph upstairs last evening), to the ludicrous (must we allow pets

in this building? I could smell cat dander through the vents). Cat dander can be dangerous, he had responded facetiously. But Miss Dewey had not smiled. He had never seen her smile.

"My inlaid box has been moved. It is now facing west instead of north." She pointed her long index finger in the direction of the box so he could make no mistake about her claim and pursed her thin lips tightly, just covering the rather large and ill-fitting dentures.

Mr. Trainor grinned indulgently, his heavy lips still covering most of his teeth. "Is it possible you could have bumped it yourself in cleaning, perhaps?" He had seen her flat on more than one occasion, and from the looks of it she spent most of her waking hours tidying up.

Miss Dewey could see that he did not understand. "I am telling you that someone came into my flat and moved it—on purpose."

Mr. Trainor's gracious smile was quickly giving way to irritation, which he tried hard not to show, being the pleasant man that he always was. He envisioned himself standing there listening to Miss Dewey's charges for at least another fifteen years. How would he respond then, when he was sixty and she over eighty? Would he still be placating her with his smile and soothing words? He imagined he would, because it would be so unlike him to do otherwise. He was such an agreeable man.

"I don't really know what you expect me to do, Miss Dewey," he replied tonelessly.

She nearly spat at him as she put her face close to his in a defiant pose. "I expect you to make sure there is proper security in this building. Whoever was in my flat is probably planning to nick something in future."

"Oh, I can't imagine that, Miss Dewey. This is a very safe area. Very few break-ins, you know."

Well, she could certainly imagine what Mr. Trainor refused to, and she did so for the next few days until she finally turned the inlaid box back to face the north. The incongruity was driving her dotty.

Nothing occurred to disturb her until nearly a week later, when she returned home from her daily walk in a nearby park. The sun shone brightly outside, and the crocuses were beginning to bloom. Spring was finally here, and Miss Dewey felt almost happy. Until she entered the kitchen.



Opening the oak cabinet in her sparkling kitchen to retrieve a tin of food, she noticed with alarm that the tinned salmon she had planned on for lunch was not in the usual *S* spot. With even more alarm she found that the tomato soup was aligned with the apple-sauce and the peaches were over with the beans. It was quite clear that someone had been in her flat again, disturbing her things, bringing disorganization into what was otherwise an orderly life.

It was, however, not at all clear to Mr. Trainor.

Miss Dewey stood by the cabinet door, flinging her hand in the direction of the tinned food on the shelf.

"Just look at this!" she wailed.

Mr. Trainor was puzzled. "Look—at what, Miss Dewey?"

"You mean you can't see it?" she asked incredulously.

He screwed up his left eye and jutted out his bottom lip as if he might somehow see better with his face contorted.

"The tins—they're not in alphabetical order any more!" The beady eyes flashed with triumph.

"Oh yes, of course they're not," he nodded vigorously. Then, looking up with even more confusion, if that was possible, he uttered a monosyllable. "So?"

Miss Dewey hooted with impatience. "I keep all my tins in alphabetical order. I insist on organization, Mr. Trainor, something you are obviously not familiar with or you wouldn't be so uninformed about what goes on here at Waverly Mansions.

"Anyway, as I told you last week," she continued without taking a breath, "someone has been in my flat. They've rearranged all the tinned goods so now I can't find a thing. And I think whoever it is might be dangerous."

Mr. Trainor considered for a moment the absurdity of this possible scenario. Someone creeping into Miss Dewey's flat and deliberately mixing up her tins of food out of pure meanness or, even more unlikely, as a threatening gesture. He almost laughed out loud but refrained because he did so pride himself on being eternally calm and agreeable. Miss Dewey, however, was continually testing his good nature.

"I shall keep an eye out, Miss Dewey. I am sure you are quite safe here at Waverly Mansions, though."

Miss Dewey wasn't sure about that at all. She didn't feel safe any more, not after the inlaid box and the tinned goods incidents. She determined that Mr. Trainor had no imagination, since he insisted on trivializing her concerns, reminding her of the scores

of students she had tutored who lacked the ability to imagine anything outside of their own wretched little lives. Mr. Trainor might have been one of her own students, he was so dreadfully uninspired.

That evening she reorganized the cabinet, meticulously placing everything back in alphabetical order. She opened the tin of salmon she had found coupled with the apricots and ate it for dinner. Then she proceeded to clean her flat, scrupulously so. She scrubbed where there was no dirt and polished where there was no dust. Finally satisfied when the flat was shining and smelled strongly of ammonia and furniture oil, she tried to forget about the tins and the inlaid box, checked her heart medicines to see if they were still in order (they were), and went to bed.

A few hours later, Miss Dewey was awakened by a thumping sound coming from overhead. At first she thought it must be the antiquated central heating system, knocking against the pipes as it sometimes did. But that particular noise was usually more hollow sounding and less frequent than this methodical dull bump in the night. There was nothing to do, she thought with determination, but to go straight upstairs and put an end to it.

That new female tenant directly above her on the first floor, who had thankfully remained nameless like the others (excepting Mr. Trainor, of course), must be making this infernal noise, and Miss Dewey was not about to let her get started. She must be told in no uncertain terms that Miss Dewey demanded peace and quiet from her neighbors.

She rapped on the new tenant's door loudly. She rapped again and continued to rap until the skin on her bony knuckles began to wear thin. She also rang the bell several times in between, but it didn't appear to be in working order. She had a notion to go downstairs and wake Mr. Trainor from his undoubtedly sluggish sleep to resolve this situation. But he would just smile in that patronizing way of his and say something falsely reassuring like, "Are we a bit out of sorts tonight, Miss Dewey?" She really could not face it, not at two in the morning.

She finally gave up and returned to her ground floor flat. The bumping continued for a short time, and then it abruptly ceased.

In the morning an especially peevish Miss Dewey, if it was possible for her to be more peevish than she usually was, marched up the stairs to the new tenant's flat and resumed the rapping and ringing of the night before. Perhaps she had gone out already, Miss



Dewey decided as she retreated to her own flat. But a few moments later she dismissed that notion when she heard running water from directly upstairs through the vent in her bathroom. The woman upstairs was clearly at home, so she had purposely refused to answer her door. Would she be leaving soon for work? Did she even have some sort of employment? Miss Dewey suddenly regretted that she had not paid more attention to the daily activities of the tenant upstairs at least. She decided to wait outside her own door so she wouldn't miss the woman when she finally came down. She would have to come down eventually.

Miss Dewey stood vigil at her door for another thirty minutes or so until the woman from upstairs appeared, passing Miss Dewey on her way outside, looking straight ahead.

"You kept me up half the night," Miss Dewey snarled as she stood at her doorway, arms tightly folded, her pointed chin jutting out. After standing there for so long, her temper was strained, and her legs ached. She would have to put on her orthopedic hose when she was finished with this interview, that much was certain.

The woman from upstairs stopped and stared blankly in Miss Dewey's direction. "Pardon me?"

"I said you kept me awake last night with that bumping sound. I'll give you to know that I don't tolerate noise of any kind, and I expect you will be more solicitous of my need for quiet in future." Miss Dewey's skinny hands were planted on her bony hips; she stood her ground solidly.

The woman did not apologize.

"You don't remember me, do you, Miss Dewey?"

She supposed the woman upstairs could have learned her name from Mr. Trainor or from the letter boxes, but she didn't like it when she used it so familiarly.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean. We haven't met, until now, that is."

"Oh but we have, Miss Dewey," the woman smiled coolly. "You were a schoolmistress at the primary school I attended, and I was one of your pupils." She rattled off her name, but Miss Dewey didn't recognize it and quickly forgot it.

"I'm afraid I don't remember you." Miss Dewey had scarcely remembered her students' names when she had them in her classroom, so she certainly couldn't be expected to remember them now. She had always referred to them as a whole rather than individually. They were all so bloody unremarkable.

Miss Dewey cleared her throat before continuing. "But anyway, I must speak with you about the noise."

The woman upstairs ignored her last remark and went on in the same level, unemotional tone of voice. "I'm not at all surprised you don't remember me. I was a rather plain child."

Miss Dewey noticed that she was still quite plain, nondescript even. Her long, straight hair was an artificial blonde (capped by suspicious dark roots), her eyes a vacant blue, and her complexion pasty. Her figure was thin and undeveloped.

"You didn't notice me then, so I could hardly expect you to remember me now, could I?"

Miss Dewey supposed that she would be expected to ask the woman what she'd been doing since she left school, the sort of thing which she couldn't have cared less about but which was part of polite conversation. Then she promptly reminded herself that she had given up polite conversation since she retired. It was no longer required. There had been too many times in the past when she had to pretend she actually liked her students just to keep her position, but in reality she could not befriend her pupils and teach them at the same time. She taught them the necessary curriculum so they could pass their exams, because if they failed she might lose her position. In retrospect, she supposed that many of them hadn't enjoyed school, but that was of little concern to her. It wasn't necessary that they enjoy themselves, for heaven's sake. She certainly hadn't.

"Back to last night. I think it was very rude of you to make such a racket, and then to avoid answering your door like a coward when you surely must have heard me banging on it."

"Oh, were you? I didn't hear anything, I'm afraid. It was a bat, actually." She paused for dramatic effect. "When I'm feeling a bit out of sorts, I hit the floor with it." She stared placidly at Miss Dewey, the watery blue eyes unwavering.

"A cricket bat?" Miss Dewey asked uncertainly.

The woman nodded calmly. "It relieves my anxiety. Stops me from doing something much worse with it."

Miss Dewey blinked her eyes and straightened her thin neck, trying to decide whether the woman was putting her on. "I'll thank you to stop doing it, especially at night. Or I'll—I'll telephone the police," Miss Dewey threatened, with considerably less spirit than before, however.

The woman from upstairs, still unruffled, smiled unpleasantly and strode out the front door without an apology.

Miss Dewey was highly dissatisfied with their interchange. The woman from upstairs didn't seem to care at all that her neighbor was so upset, and she even seemed vaguely pleased about it. Miss Dewey tried to recall her name but couldn't. It was just as well, really, because she wasn't about to occupy her mind with such an insignificant person. She had cleaning to do.

Later that afternoon Miss Dewey bumped into Mr. Trainor when she carted her garbage out to the dustbin. She descended upon him with a vengeance. "I can tell you I didn't get any sleep last night. If you won't speak with that woman, I'm going to call the police."

Mr. Trainor considered briefly the inanity of such a claim. The coppers wouldn't give Miss Dewey any serious attention over it, but he still didn't want policemen hanging about. It might cause him some inconvenience. "I'll speak with her about it, Miss Dewey. I'm sure you won't have any trouble again."

"Well, it's easy for you to be so sure about everything. You're not the one who has to endure all this irritation. I rue the day when I came upon Waverly Mansions."

Mr. Trainor rued it, too, for without Miss Dewey to complain, his life would be quite pleasant. Tonight he could have settled down for an evening of the telly and a kidney pie, followed by a gooseberry fool, perhaps. He'd put on a stone or two in the past couple of years, but what other pleasures did he have? He deserved *some* enjoyment, after all.

But this evening such delights would have to be postponed because Miss Dewey had made sure he had another absurd task to complete for her. He couldn't see that this situation would ever end, and it made him inordinately tired. He sat down heavily in the armchair in his comfortable flat and took a long nap.

The following day Miss Dewey went out for her daily constitutional, but when she returned she found that Jane Austen was in the T section. She discovered with horror that all her books had been disarranged. E. M. Forster was mixed up with the Brontës, and D. H. Lawrence now accompanied Dorothy Sayers. Miss Dewey had never actually read any of her books, other than the Dorothy Sayers, but she did like to see them sitting there intelligently upon the shelf, organized and easily located.

She whined to Mr. Trainor but to no avail, because he was still decidedly skeptical about the truth of her claims. For the next few days, when she went out for her walk or to the shops, she always returned to find something disturbed. The artificial flowers strewn on the floor, the cooker turned on, little things that were slowly driving Miss Dewey to distraction. Mr. Trainor kept insisting that she might have done these things herself, unwittingly, of course; but his theory brought her no comfort.

There was only one solution. She'd stay at home.

This plan worked for a few days, until one night when Miss Dewey again awoke to the sound from above. It soon became intolerable, so she repeated the useless trek upstairs. The thumping conveniently stopped as soon as she left her own flat, but Miss Dewey rapped long and loud on the woman's door anyway. Predictably, there was no answer.

She trudged slowly back downstairs, heading to the back of the building where Mr. Trainor's flat was. She reconsidered knocking at his door, however. He'd be no help at all. When she finally returned to her own flat at the front of the building, exhausted with her efforts, she noticed with alarm that her door was open. Had she forgotten to shut it?

She closed the door tight behind her and locked it. As she walked into her bedroom, something swung down from the door frame and hit her squarely in the face, causing her to cry out.

She switched on the lights and saw that it was a cloth doll with a rope tied tightly around its neck. The doll had brown yarn hair, malevolent painted eyes, and a final disturbing detail. There were tears painted on the cloth face.

Miss Dewey pulled the doll down, setting it on the coffee table in front of the settee. This time Mr. Trainor would surely believe her. She would speak to him first thing in the morning. She didn't want to leave the security of her own surroundings that night, although she nervously wondered if there was really any safety left there now.

Miss Dewey lay on the settee half the night staring into the darkness. She was, for the first time in her life, quite frightened. Before, someone had been in her flat when she was away. Now someone had entered her flat when she was in the building. She got up several times to check the door and the windows to see if they were still shut securely.

She must have finally dropped off to sleep because she awoke with a start just as sunlight was beginning to filter in through the closed window blinds. She was still on the settee, and the doll sat conspicuously on the coffee table. Miss Dewey felt a crick in her neck as she tried to get up. She rubbed it harshly. The fear she had felt the night before had now reduced itself to anger. She was not going to let whoever was doing this get away with it any longer.

She tidied up her bed first. She couldn't have the police finding her flat anything but neat. She must contact them now; there was no other choice. She went into the washroom and smoothed back her iron hair into its usual severe bun, scrubbed her face, put her teeth in, and splashed some lavender cologne on. Then she chose a crisp gingham housedress, put on her orthopedic hose and sensible black shoes, and went into the kitchen. She took her heart medication and then proceeded to go directly to Mr. Trainor's. She felt triumphant and quite sure of herself. He would, of course, believe her this time because she had evidence he could not deny.

A heavy-eyed Mr. Trainor answered the door only after Miss Dewey had knocked for well on five minutes. He was untidily whiskered, and what little hair remained on the sides of his bald head was sticking out, as if it had been styled that way. He had a yellowed T-shirt on that barely stretched over the substantial girth of his belly. He was yawning like a cat when Miss Dewey released her torrent of grievances.

"It's about time," she spat. "My flat's been broken into again, while I was there, mind you!" Surprisingly, Miss Dewey didn't comment on Mr. Trainor's unkempt appearance; she was far too involved in relating her story.

He listened patiently, as he always did, to the details of her charges. He then attempted to smooth the sides of his sparse hair down, but they stubbornly popped back up again.

"Did you hear anything unusual last night?" he finally said. "Anyone moving about, perhaps?"

Miss Dewey smacked her lips with annoyance. "I told you, man, I was asleep. Are you daft?"

Not quite yet, he thought tiredly. "Did they nick something?"

"No, they didn't take anything. I told you they left me something instead, something malicious. We'll have to ring the police. Follow me," she added with authority, motioning for him to come along.

Mr. Trainor pulled on a jersey that lay over the well-worn armchair just behind the door. It was a tatty, faded blue, but it did

cover the much worse looking T-shirt. Besides, there was a definite chill in the air.

Miss Dewey grumbled all the way down the corridor. "I told you someone had been in my flat, but you just wouldn't believe me. Well, now maybe you'll take me seriously."

Mr. Trainor thought that was unlikely, considering the nature of her past complaints. He yawned again and trudged heavily along behind her, like an obedient dog. Miss Dewey stopped sharply at her open door.

"I know I shut this door," she said firmly. She turned to look back at Mr. Trainor; he raised his eyebrows doubtfully.

"I did!" There was a note of panic in her trembling voice. She hurried inside as Mr. Trainor trod along behind her, stopping short in the sitting room, her mouth open in surprise.

The doll was gone.

Miss Dewey scuttled frantically from room to room, searching for the doll. She mumbled incoherently to Mr. Trainor about a doll hanging from the doorway to her bedroom while she began busily overturning drawers and clearing shelves.

Mr. Trainor was uncommonly worried. Miss Dewey's neat, tidy little flat was being destroyed, and she was doing it all by herself. It occurred to Mr. Trainor as he witnessed this scene of mayhem before him that Miss Dewey might be mental, and this alarmed him. It would never do to have a mental case at Waverly Mansions. The other tenants might get frightened and leave. Mr. Trainor could ill afford vacancies.

For once, Miss Dewey didn't harass him for not believing her. She didn't suggest that they call the police. In fact, she didn't speak at all. She eventually collapsed on the floral patterned settee, staring blankly at the disaster she had created around her.

Mr. Trainor thought it best to say nothing about her behavior. He meekly returned to his own flat.

Later that day, Miss Dewey came to her senses and began the process of putting things back together again. She stayed up half the night, not even stopping to eat, until all her books were back on the shelf in ABC order and the tinned goods aligned in the pantry. Feeling weak but too fatigued to care for herself properly, she flung herself on her bed and fell asleep, almost immediately.

She slept heavily and woke up late, feeling groggy rather than refreshed. When she awoke, she was still curled up, uncovered, on top of the duvet. As she slowly focused her eyes and rolled over in

a stretch, she turned to face the doll again, lying on the pillow beside her. The gloating eyes stared at her, and Miss Dewey screamed. Bloodcurdling and shrill. But no one heard, or at least no one came to her aid, except for the woman upstairs with the name she couldn't remember and the face that was so nondescript it almost faded into oblivion.

"Are you all right, Miss Dewey?" the woman asked in a concerned voice when Miss Dewey dragged herself to the door in response to the bell. "I heard your screams through the vents, or I must have, because they were quite clear," she added solicitously.

Miss Dewey opened her mouth to tell the woman upstairs everything that had happened, about the doll and the disarrangement of her flat. She was so distraught she felt an overpowering need to tell someone, but then she brought herself up short. She could not trust the woman upstairs, what with her obsequious gestures and her knowing eyes.

"I'm quite all right," she replied gratingly. "I just saw—a spider. I have such a fear of spiders." Miss Dewey was not even remotely afraid of spiders, but she had to make up something. Whenever she saw a spider, she simply squashed it with her shoe. Spiders were easily removed.

The woman nodded, this student of hers whom she couldn't remember. "Well, if you need anything at all, just let me know," she said, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on Miss Dewey.

Indeed, thought Miss Dewey. A woman who doesn't even answer her own door could hardly be relied on for assistance. She called out after her, "I've forgotten, what is your name?"

The woman smiled ingratiatingly and replied, "Mind you keep your door locked, Miss Dewey. An old woman like yourself is not safe here alone."

Miss Dewey began sweating. She had kept her door locked, hadn't she? And had it stopped the intruder? No. She went into the kitchen and filled a glass with water. She opened the cabinet containing her vast store of medicines. Miss Dewey had something for everything; today she chose a tablet for anxiety and chased it down with the water. She retrieved the doll along with her handbag and rushed thoughtlessly out.

She scurried back to Mr. Trainor's and pounded on the door. He breathed deeply when he saw who it was, as if bracing himself for another onslaught.



Miss Dewey rattled on breathlessly, "You must give me a lift to the police station. This is an emergency. I've found the doll!"

He stared at her blankly, unimpressed by this revelation.

"The doll that was left hanging in my flat yesterday, Mr. Trainor. I must speak with the police!"

Of course, he thought humorlessly. Why not? He sighed and put on his windcheater because it was breezy out and looked like rain. It was just as well he took her now rather than suffer the endless recriminations that would follow if he refused. But it was really quite a bother. It was Saturday, and he was planning on kippers and tomatoes for breakfast, then sitting in front of the telly to watch a cricket match. Mr. Trainor found nothing more pleasant than watching cricket, and it was infinitely less demanding than actually playing the sport. He envisioned himself relaxing for hours undisturbed, eating the food his sister had prepared for him. Ah well, maybe this excursion with Miss Dewey wouldn't take long and he could get back in time to watch the end of the match.

Mr. Trainor refused to accompany her into the station. He didn't want them thinking he was mental as well. And maybe, he thought with a sudden glimmer of hope, they would realize she was absolutely crackers and even suggest that she be committed. The possibility of that's happening was especially remote, but the idea did give him some momentary comfort as he sat waiting outside in the red Mini.

Miss Dewey entered the doors to the station with the doll tucked inside her handbag. She couldn't bear looking at those reproving eyes any longer. She presented a disheveled figure, still in the clothes from the day before, strands of hair falling out of the bun. She was suddenly embarrassed that she had forgotten to tidy herself up, but it was too late now.

The nice young officer listened tolerantly to her grievances, looked doubtfully at the doll (he couldn't say it was necessarily intended as a malicious act), and told her to keep her doors shut tight, just as the woman upstairs had done. But while his words were intended to be comforting, she suddenly realized that the woman's were not. The woman upstairs seemed quietly menacing, somehow. Could she possibly be Miss Dewey's tormentor?

"I think I might know who's been getting into my flat," Miss Dewey announced with indecision, telling him in sketchy detail about her former forgotten pupil. It was unfortunate that she knew so little about her.

The officer sensed her uncertainty and responded soothingly. "Well, I think, Miss Dewey, that we shall need a bit more evidence than what you've got so far. If you can find something linking her specifically to these uh—" he coughed and looked as if he were suppressing a grin "—incidents, then we will be happy to speak with her."

Miss Dewey could see that he did not understand the seriousness of what was happening, and that he probably didn't even believe her, as Mr. Trainor had not. And she was tempted to rip that soothing voice out of his throat and smash it. But instead, considering the physical impossibility of such a task, she replaced the doll carefully in her handbag, gathered up what little dignity she had left, and flounced out of the station in frustration.

Mr. Trainor watched Miss Dewey guardedly as he drove her back to Waverly Mansions. The trip took longer than he had expected because they were delayed for quite some time by a traffic accident. Miss Dewey was uncharacteristically silent and he was grateful for that, but he worried about when her next round of grievances would begin.

By the time he dropped Miss Dewey off and parked the Mini in the garage, the cricket match was over. He would never be able to see the same match again, and it was all because of Miss Dewey. He moaned in disappointment, and ate the bangers and mash his sister had prepared for lunch, all of them, for it was now well past lunch and his plans for the morning were ruined. After that, he polished off the trifle in the fridge, comforting himself with at least that meager pleasure. He would have to consider getting a VCR so he didn't continually have to miss his programs when he was catering to Miss Dewey's whims. But oh, the expense, he thought regretfully. He could see that the situation with Miss Dewey was not going to improve. It could only get worse.

Miss Dewey glumly returned to her flat. She looked down at her rumpled housedress, the one she had slept in last night, and she felt exhausted and beaten. This was a foreign feeling for Miss Dewey, but the curious thing was, she felt unable to fend it off. Odder still, that woman from upstairs was sitting casually on Miss Dewey's settee, as if it were her very own rather than the property of someone she barely knew.

Miss Dewey opened her mouth to speak, to tell her that she knew what was going on, but the woman spoke first.

"I want you to sit down, and I want you to sit down now," she ordered firmly, and with such authority that the former schoolmistress felt compelled to obey. Miss Dewey crumpled into the armchair farthest from the settee.

"I wonder if you know, Miss Dewey, how many children you tortured when you were a teacher. Young, defenseless children you were responsible for."

"Well, I hardly think that tortured is the proper word," she replied hoarsely. "You're implying that I beat them or something." Miss Dewey was surprised that she was still able to speak up for herself. She also knew that she had a perfect right to ask this woman to leave, but was strangely unable to.

"Yes, I think tortured is a very good word. Do you remember when you forced me to stand in front of the class and announce ten times, 'I am stupid because I forgot my pencils'? My classmates snickered because they agreed with you. You didn't pick on everyone, never the strong ones. I learned that much later. You usually selected one or maybe two pupils in each class to degrade and hold up to everyone as examples of what they mustn't become. We could have started a club or an association even, there were so many of us."

Miss Dewey looked at her former pupil nervously and stammered, "I don't remember doing anything like that. I was very strict, of course, but I was hardly cruel. Perhaps you've got me mixed up with someone else?" she added hopefully.

The woman smiled that placating smile and tossed back her head, smoothing out the bleached, stringy locks with her free hand. She was all dressed in black, the bones around her neck jutting out prominently where the blouse was cut low. She began picking at her fingernails with a file she had taken from her pocket.

"I'm afraid not, Miss Dewey. I've been thinking about this for a long time. I know exactly who you are, but I do understand why you don't remember me." She spoke serenely and matter-of-factly, as if she were discussing the weather or the ingredients in a shepherd's pie. "I was too insignificant, hardly worth bothering with. Except to belittle. I wonder, did it make you feel better about yourself to make me feel like nothing?"

Miss Dewey couldn't defend herself, not really. It had been such a long time ago. Beads of sweat began to form across her brow. She wasn't at all well. Had she taken her heart tablet today? She couldn't remember.

"I would like you to leave now. I've heard enough of this nonsense."

The woman upstairs fairly cackled at her request. "Oh, I'm not leaving, Miss Dewey, not until I'm good and ready. And I won't be good and ready until you hear what I have to say."

Miss Dewey got up to go to the door. She suddenly wished that she had a telephone so she could call for help.

"You're not going anywhere, Miss Dewey, not until I'm finished with you."

Somehow her last words frightened Miss Dewey into obedience. Maybe if she humored her former pupil, did what she wanted . . .

"If I listen to you, will you go away and leave me alone?"

The woman briefly considered this. "Perhaps," she replied casually.

It was a dubious reassurance, but Miss Dewey held on to a thread of hope that she might be able to satisfy this woman and be allowed to return to her orderly, solitary life.

"I've told the police about you," Miss Dewey said tremulously, her voice cracking as she sat down again slowly in the armchair. She worried that this woman might be violent.

"Oh, and what did you tell them?"

"I showed them the doll and told them about the times you broke into my flat and disturbed my things." She motioned towards the doll, which was now sitting on the floor beside her chair.

"And did they believe you?"

Miss Dewey fell silent as the woman stared at her with unforgiving eyes.

"Well, did they? Tell the truth now, Miss Dewey. A good school-mistress is always brutally honest. You were always honest with me, weren't you?"

"Well yes, I mean perhaps not," Miss Dewey replied uncertainly, unsure what she was answering to and what the attendant consequences might be.

"You don't really think they believed you? Look at you, you're pathetic and even comical. I'm sure they thought you needed your head tested, with all your wild stories of your horrid little mundane life."

Miss Dewey opened her mouth to defend herself, but the woman interrupted her acrimoniously. "I have a key to your flat. It's quite convenient, really."

"You have a key?" Miss Dewey asked dubiously. "But how did you get it?"

"Well, it's not a key, actually. I use a hairpin, that's how useless your lock is. I can get into your flat whenever I like." She paused a moment, then changed the subject. "By the way, what do you think of my figure now?"

Miss Dewey hardly heard the question. "What?" she asked in confusion.

The woman repeated her question. Miss Dewey eyed her carefully and could see at once that the woman didn't have a figure, all straight up and down, bones jutting out wherever you could see them under the billowy skirt and blouse. But she thought it best not to comment on this.

The woman nodded quickly. "I thought as much. You won't tell me what you really think because you're a coward. You're afraid of me now. The tables have turned, haven't they? But since you don't remember, I'll tell you. I was quite fat when I was your student. Do you remember when you ridiculed me for my untidy desk? 'This pupil has a piggy desk, so she must be a pig.' The others laughed, of course. They were so relieved that you hadn't targeted them. But I didn't laugh, especially since 'piggy' became my nickname."

"I don't recall saying any of those things to you. I think," Miss Dewey added bravely, "I think that you're making it all up."

The woman from upstairs laughed shrilly. "I expect the worst thing you ever did was make me wet my pants because you wouldn't allow me to use the loo. You made me stand in front of the room while you criticized me about the mess I had made, and you drew everyone's attention to the dreadful stink in the room. Then you made me sit in it the rest of the day while the other children plugged their noses and told me how disgusting I was. You never lifted a finger to help me. That doll you have there was me; you might as well have put a noose around my neck. It would have saved me a lot of pain."

"What do you want from me?" Miss Dewey asked in a small voice.

The woman answered quickly. "Why, I want an apology, of course. Heartfelt, if you don't mind."

"That's all you want?" Miss Dewey asked with surprise.

The woman bit her lip and appraised Miss Dewey's relieved eyes critically. "I think so. Let's try it and see if I feel any better."

Miss Dewey spoke without hesitation. "I, I'm sorry for whatever I might have done." She focused her beady eyes on the stern face of the woman from upstairs. "I don't think I meant to hurt you, but I am sorry." Of course Miss Dewey wasn't truly sorry because she couldn't even recall who this woman was. But if an apology would appease her, she would certainly oblige. Miss Dewey wondered if she was putting her on a bit, but she didn't know because the woman stood up and was apparently going to leave. This was a blessed relief to Miss Dewey, since she didn't feel at all well. She was feeling lightheaded, and there was a pain in her chest. She needed to have a liedown before she passed out.

Although it was only early afternoon, the sky outside was dark and threatening, making it seem like early evening. In Miss Dewey's flat, none of the lamps was switched on, and there was a damp, funereal air. The woman stood for a moment with her back to Miss Dewey, her eyes on the door and her arms folded tightly, as if she were considering something. Then she turned around slowly, facing Miss Dewey again.

"You know, I'm afraid I don't feel any better after your apology, Miss Dewey," the woman bantered. "It's just not enough. I should think you will have to do much more than just say you're sorry. Did you really think that was enough?"

The woman kept talking, but Miss Dewey couldn't make out exactly what she was saying. Finally the woman from upstairs noticed that her audience was fading.

"You don't look at all well, Miss Dewey," the woman said with a trace of concern. "Should I call a doctor?"

Miss Dewey shook her head. The pain in her chest was mild now, but it held the prospect of becoming excruciating. The nitroglycerin would fix it, though. Miss Dewey walked into the kitchen slowly, adding in explanation to the woman sitting on the settee, "I'll just get my medicine." As if that woman was somehow entitled to an explanation. It seemed that she was entitled to everything, Miss Dewey thought with irritation. She took a nitro tablet and slipped it under her tongue, supporting herself by leaning against the cupboard. The pain subsided after a few minutes, and Miss Dewey was able to straighten her back.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked with what Miss Dewey thought was a smirk.

She wanted to answer "Clear on out of here and leave me be!," but instead she turned around and smiled sweetly at the woman

upstairs. She had made a decision.

"I'm feeling much better now, thanks. Would you like a cup of hot cocoa? I'm just making one and it'll only take a minute to put one on for you, too. It's such a chilly day out."

The woman looked taken aback, surprised at Miss Dewey's offer of hospitality. Too surprised to be suspicious, she replied, "Why yes, actually. That would be lovely."

Miss Dewey heated the milk, adding the sugar and cocoa and stirring it all together. The woman from upstairs sat quietly in the dark, not paying any attention to Miss Dewey while she fussed in the kitchen. Miss Dewey arranged the mugs of cocoa on a tray and took it over to the countertop underneath her store of medicines, out of the woman's line of vision. She had made an instantaneous but powerful decision. This former pupil would never let her alone. Hadn't she said, 'I just don't think your apology's enough, Miss Dewey'? And hadn't Miss Dewey's heart been failing her more and more ever since this torment began? Miss Dewey could always move out, find another suitable flat (a nearly impossible task), but why should she have to? The woman would probably follow her, and besides, before she had come along, Waverly Mansions had been perfect for Miss Dewey. No, she could not go on like this. Miss Dewey examined the row of medicines on the shelf. She had enough sleeping tablets to put all of Parliament out cold. She chose the most potent in capsule form and emptied the powder of all the remaining capsules into the mug. She did it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The idea had simply occurred to her, and she acted upon it without hesitation. She nearly laughed out loud at her bravura. She hadn't read all those Dorothy Sayers murder mysteries for nothing.

The strong taste of the cocoa along with the sugar would disguise the taste of the sleeping powders. Miss Dewey tested it with her tongue. Not much taste anyway.

"Would you like marshmallows in your cocoa?" Miss Dewey called out pleasantly to the woman.

"Marshmallows?" she replied uncertainly. "Well, I guess so. Might be fun."

Miss Dewey was already weary of playing the pleasant host. She couldn't go on like this forever, either. Smiling at people just to placate them? She shuddered involuntarily. The thought frightened her far more than what she was about to do. Besides, it was



self-defense, really. One of them had to go, and if it went on like this, it would be she.

Miss Dewey carried the tray in carefully, remembering that the mug with the marshmallows belonged to that woman. She had wisely left her own mug plain. The woman drank the hot cocoa greedily and all too quickly. But that was a boon because it didn't take long before the woman started getting sleepy. She hadn't complained at all about the taste. It had been almost too easy.

"You look like you need to nap," Miss Dewey suggested.

The woman blinked her eyes like an overfed toad. "I really am very tired. Maybe I could just take a catnap here," she added, stretching out her legs and lying down. In her dark clothes she looked like a skinny black cat, except for all that peroxided hair sticking out.

Oh no you don't, thought Miss Dewey. She pulled the woman to her feet and helped her to the door. "You'll be much more comfortable upstairs in your own flat." Miss Dewey opened the door slowly and peered out into the front hall. No one about. That was a spot of luck. With the woman's arm draped over her shoulders, they made it up the stairs and through the unlocked door. The woman's flat, not surprisingly, was extremely untidy, clothes dropped in the most unlikely places and opened tins of food lying around, collecting flies. Miss Dewey grimaced. Panting heavily, she dropped the woman on the shabby settee.

She wondered whether the dose had been enough to kill the woman. It hadn't been a well thought-out plan, a crime of passion, really. She couldn't be sure whether the woman would actually die, could she? And what if she didn't? Then what? As she considered the possibilities, a significant, unattended detail struck her full force. If the woman died, which she must, Miss Dewey had decided, the police would want to know where the sleeping tablets had come from. They had to have come from somewhere. There would need to be an empty prescription bottle lying about, and Miss Dewey certainly couldn't give her the one from her own flat, with her own incriminating name on it.

It was most unlikely that the woman had the same prescription as Miss Dewey, but she searched through the cabinets in the w.c. and the kitchen anyway. Predictably, there was nothing. The woman wasn't on any medication at all. Miss Dewey felt a rising panic. She was desperate now, and it was certainly too late to turn back and reconsider her plan.

She glanced around the disorderly flat and eyed the gas stove in the connecting kitchen. Of course, she thought with relief. That would cover things up nicely. Death from asphyxiation would disguise the fact that the woman had previously been fed sleeping tablets. They wouldn't even check, would they? The woman was clearly depressed; it would be easy to chalk it all up to suicide. Miss Dewey walked over to the stove and turned it on, leaving the oven door open wide. Before leaving, she checked to see if the windows were shut tight. They were. Then she checked to see if the woman was sound asleep. She was. Miss Dewey looked out into the corridor and saw that it was still deserted. She shut the door and hurried back down to her own flat, feeling lightfooted and understandably relieved. Her chest pain was gone; a considerable burden had been lifted.

Until Miss Dewey returned to her own flat, however, she hadn't considered that the other tenants might eventually smell the gas fumes. She had to be out of the building, just in case. She went for a walk in the light drizzle, making an unlikely stop at a nearby museum, then checking in at the library. By the time she returned a few hours later, the woman upstairs had been discovered. An ambulance was parked out in front. She heard an officer say *suicide* to Mr. Trainor, and *nothing we could do*.

The next few weeks were positively blissful. Miss Dewey felt much better physically, and she had returned to her tidy, predictable life. She didn't bother Mr. Trainor nearly as often, and he responded in kind by refusing to let the vacated flat upstairs to a couple of musicians (intent on practicing their loud instruments all night). Mr. Trainor had promised to find a quiet tenant, although it would have to be done soon because he was losing money. He could ill afford that.

Naturally, Mr. Trainor had some concerns about what had happened to the tenant upstairs. All that dreadful business with Miss Dewey and then the woman ends up dead? But he didn't want any scandal (such things cost him dearly), and he certainly didn't want any more trouble. It was a matter for the police, and they were satisfied. Besides, he had other, more pressing concerns. Such as how to schedule enough television and meals while still managing all the affairs at Waverly Mansions.

Miss Dewey, on the other hand, was basking in the glory of having gotten away with murder. If you wanted to call it that.

Miss Dewey preferred not to. Instead, she saw it as taking care of an impossible situation. Self-defense, she reminded herself. It had been so frightening for her when everything was out of order. But now things were back to normal again. She thought she could go on like this forever.

Until one evening when she walked out of her flat and met up with the new tenant upstairs. Mr. Trainor had held to his promise and chosen a quiet person. The tenant hadn't bothered Miss Dewey in the three weeks she'd been there. But tonight was different. Miss Dewey tried to avoid acknowledging her by not meeting her eyes, but the tenant would have none of it. She stood squarely in front of her, blocking the front door, so that Miss Dewey was forced to look up at a rather large young woman with pale skin scarred by ravaging bouts with acne.

The young woman spoke first, bitterly and in a frightfully loud voice. "You are Miss Dewey. I was friends with the former tenant upstairs. Such a pity she died like she did."

Miss Dewey met the woman's firm gaze fearfully.

"You don't remember me, do you?" Miss Dewey's throat went dry as she shook her head. "You didn't like me much, I'm afraid. I was one of your pupils in grammar school. Some of us have kept in touch through the years." The woman sighed tiredly and tossed her head back so that the short, greasy black hair gleamed in the lamplight. "So many years ago, wasn't it? But I haven't forgotten it. I could never forget it." The woman sniffed with disdain, as if Miss Dewey were some kind of rodent.

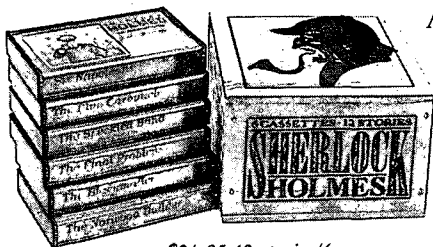
"Do you believe all that poppycock about suicide? I don't, not for a minute. I'm sure you don't, either."

Miss Dewey's heart fluttered. She saw a malicious, familiar gleam in the new tenant's sharp eyes.

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# How to Win at Russian Roulette

by Ron Goulart

**S**he resurfaced in his life at a few minutes after midnight on Halloween. Her right arm in a sling, barefooted, wearing an old terry cloth robe from a West Hollywood gym over a pair of peppermint striped pajamas that obviously weren't hers, carrying her big black portfolio tucked up under her left arm, she appeared on the redwood porch of his cottage in Santa Rita Beach. The night smelled strongly of smoke, even though most of the fires that had been burning around Los Angeles that week had been put out. Her long blonde hair was tangled; her tan, freckled face had a smudge of soot across both prominent cheekbones.

"Trick or treat," she said, smiling very tentatively.

"Go away, Casey," Wes Goodhill told her. "Scram, hit the road." He tried to shut the door on her but found that, somehow, he couldn't.

"After all, Wes, I don't have the hide of an ostrich, and when you talk to me like—"

"Rhinoceros."

"Hum?"

"It's a rhino that's noted for its thick hide." He made another unsuccessful attempt to make himself close her out.

"You're making my efforts to deliver a sincere apology awfully darn difficult, Wes."

"Sincere? You're incapable of sincerity."

"Okay, I admit that I fudged the truth about my relationship with Thor Swanson, yet—"

"Who in the name of god is Thor Swanson?"

"The Scandinavian Cheap-skate Gourmet on cable," answered Casey McLeod. "I remember telling you that I wasn't dating him while you and I were living together, but actually I was. Because of my fear of an outburst of your terrible temper, though, I refrained from admitting it at the time."

"I don't have a terrible temper!"

"Oh, so? And yet you're standing here on your doorstep howling like a chimpanzee at me."

"Banshee. It's a banshee that howls."

"Well, at least you admit you're howling at me," she said.

"Anyhow, you might at least invite me in."

"Wait now," he said. "Didn't you move out on me two years ago and declare that you'd never return?"

"Was it that recently? Seems longer ago."

"Two years, five months, three weeks, but who's counting? Go away now, quit darkening my door."

"I can't."

"Certainly you can. Simply hop back in your car and drive on home."

"For one thing, I don't have a car."

Frowning, he squinted out at the curving street and the slanting night beach beyond. The dark Pacific was choppy tonight, and there was no sign of a car in the immediate vicinity. "How the hell'd you get here?"

"A very nice truck driver named . . . oh, you know, he has the same name as the man with the birds."

"No, I don't know. Somebody gave you a lift here? What happened to your Isuzu?"

"It exploded. Rasmussen."

"What?"

"The man who was so sweet and drove me all the way from Maravilla Canyon was named Rasmussen."

Wes took a slow, deep breath. "Why were you in Maravilla Canyon?"

"Well, as it turned out, I wish I hadn't been," she said and shrugged her left shoulder. "Can I set this darn portfolio down?"

"Sure, but *outside* my house."

She leaned it against the doorjamb. "You see, and I thought you knew this, I was housesitting for Carlos and—"

"Who's Carlos?"

"Well, Carlos Miranda, obviously."

"Never heard of him."

"You've certainly gone to seed in the—what did you say it was, two years?—in the two years since I saw you last. Working in animation at Sparey Art Studios has dumbed you down considerably, Wes," she told him. "Carlos Miranda, as any literate human being knows, is a famous Latin American novelist. Just three years ago he won the Argentinean equivalent of the Pulitzer."

"Congratulations. And you've been shacking up with this guy?"

"No, pay attention. I was housesitting for him and Carmelita, his lovely wife, while they did that publicity tour of Central America and then decided to spend a few weeks in Guatemala. I just don't know how I'm going to tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"About their lovely mansion in Maravilla Canyon—it

burned to the ground, along with my car and their twin Mercedes cars and Ruffy."

"Ruffy?"

"He was, you know, one of those frizzy little dogs. Poor dear thing."

"What you're claiming, Casey, is that the house you were looking after got caught in the canyon blaze? Leaving you homeless, without car or clothes?"

"I'm not *claiming*, damn it, I happen to be stating the absolute unblemished truth."

"Unvarnished," he corrected.

"So here I stand, a waif, an orphan of the storm, turning to my one and only true friend in all Greater Los Angeles, or in the whole darn entire state, for that matter, and you force me to stand outside with the fierce Santa Ana winds whistling through my BVD's and accuse me, for gosh sake, of fibbing."

"Fibbing? Holy moley, Casey, you are, as I know from long and painful experience, a champion liar and falsifier," he told her. "For example, I still recall the time you persuaded me to hock your Grandmother Elsie's pearl necklace, and then it turned out the thing actually belonged to a fading character actress in Santa Monica. You, how shall I politely state this, you borrowed the—"

"She *gave* it to me, the old biddy, to settle a bill for some artwork I did for her. Then she up and tried—"

"The bottom line is—I really and truly don't trust you. We spent an interesting and entertaining couple of years together, Casey, but as the bards of long ago sang, 'Them days is gone forever.'"

"Wes, please. I honestly don't have any place else to go. Only for tonight, please, if you can put me up, I'll be eternally grateful."

"How long's eternity with you? About a week and a half tops."

She looked him up and down slowly. "I get it," she said finally. "You really and truly were in love with me back then, and when I had to leave, for perfectly sensible reasons, it hurt you."

"You're very perceptive." He stood there, watching the vast inscrutable ocean, uncertain whether to yell some more or start crying a little. Sighing, Wes moved back. "Okay, come on in."

"Can you bring my portfolio? With my sprained wrist, it's tough."

"Sure." He let her step over the threshold, then brought in the thick portfolio of artwork and shut the door. "How'd you hurt your wrist?"



"Trying to save Fluffy."

"Who's Fluffy?"

"I just told you, that poor little dog."

"You said his name was Ruffy."

"No, I wouldn't have said a dumb thing like that, since the poor creature's name was Fluffy. I ought to know because I used to take him for a walk through the wooded hills of the canyon every darn night." She walked into his small, cluttered living room. "New television, same old sofa, more books piled up on everything. Why don't you ever throw out those piles of comic books?"

He ignored her interior decorating suggestions and asked, "What are you working at these days?"

"Don't you keep up with my career either?" She sat down in a fat armchair and let her pajamaed legs go wide.

"Wasn't aware you had a career."

"Hey, we're friends again," she reminded him. "I am, as I was when you and I were together, a first-rate cartoonist and—"

"First-rate isn't how I'd rank you—"

"I'm still drawing my *Bertha the Biker* comic book for Roy Pomeroy's Beachcomb Comics Press," she continued. "I've also

been doing a little modeling again and some acting."

"What sort of acting?"

"Well, not in porno epics, if that's what that goofy expression you've assumed is meant to imply, Wes. Honestly, now." She shook her head, then leaned back. "I've been doing a few small parts on TV. Most recently on a show called *Fat Cops*, but it got canceled."

"*Fat Cops*, huh? Mike wrote that. Or at least two of the four episodes they shot before it flopped."

"Mike who?"

"Mike Filchok, my best friend. You remember him; don't you?"

"The one who looks like Mickey Rooney with a facelift? The one who was always trying to come up with new excuses for patting my backside? Is that the Mike you mean?"

"The Mike I'm talking about, Casey, has often said he wouldn't touch you with a barge pole."

She gave a disdainful laugh. "It's really too bad you can't get latent prints off a person's backside after two years or I'd prove to you what your alleged chum used to try." She shrugged both shoulders and yawned. "Where can I sleep tonight?"

He nodded toward a yellow door. "Guest room's the only space available, Casey."

She stood up, stretched, yawned twice more. "I really do, you know, appreciate this. Of all the people I know in this heartless town you're the only one who isn't," she told him, smiling. "I came to the right place in my hour of distress."

Crossing to him, she kissed him on the cheek and then, tightening the robe, went into the guest room.

**T**uesday it rained, long and hard.

When Mike Filchock came hurrying into Stookie's Restaurant in Studio City, twenty minutes late, his curly red hair was plastered to his head, and the bright orange lumberjack coat he'd been wearing of late started to give off steam. "Why do we keep coming to this dump?" he inquired as he slid into the booth and faced Wes.

"It's close to the studio."

"So is Harlan's Car Wash, but we don't dine there. Although I imagine the chow's better." Yanking several paper napkins from the dispenser atop the Formica tabletop, he blotted his head. "I've had a rough day. It's a burden being the only nonjerk in the vicinity."

"How's the new show coming?"

"It's a surefire hit."

"Great. Who's going to be doing it?"

"That part's not concrete yet." He patted his chest, getting his hand all wet. "I can feel it, though. You know, you can sense a flop and you can sense a hit. And *Glickman in Remission* is going to be a Top 10 show."

"*Glickman in Remission*?"

"We changed the title from *I'm Not Dying*."

"We?"

"I'm doing this with a partner now. Rosco Manger."

"Who is?"

Mike was glancing around at the other lunchtime patrons. "Do you realize that everybody else in this pesthole is ancient? We're the only people under forty."

"You're forty-two."

"We're the only people under forty-two. Boy, the sound of all these ancient coots gumming their gruel is going to distract me."

"Tell me who Rosco Manger is."

"You ought to keep better informed about showbiz, since you work in the vineyards yourself. Manger's the guy who did *Young Bing* for the Nolan Network."

"When was this?"

Mike took another look around. "Nineteen eighty-six."

"And what was *Young Bing*?"

"Ahead of its time," answered his friend. "A brilliant concept, a sitcom dealing with the early years of Bing Crosby. The adventures of a crooner in 1930's Hollywood. A brilliant notion, huh?"

"Patrons of Stookie's must've loved it."

"Hell, it ran a full thirteen weeks. These days that's—" He paused, held up a hand. "Wait now, Wes, you're not going to distract me from my real purpose in rendezvousing with you today. I came here because I have a holy mission."

"I don't want to talk about Casey."

Mike grabbed up his menu. "Did you order?"

"Quite some time ago, yes."

"Is she still squatting with you?"

"I told her she could stay until she finds a place to live."

"That's great, that is. It's akin to telling a giant Brazilian jungle leech it can only suck your blood until another jerk comes along. Or like informing Dracula he can only bite your neck until somebody juicier pops up. Or it's similar to . . . oh, hi, Marlys. I'll have the vegetarian gyro, dear."

A plump blonde waitress had stopped beside their booth.

"How's the new concept coming along, Mike?"

"It's going to be a maximum hit, sweetheart."

"I sure hope so." Marlys rested one hand on the table edge and leaned in the red-headed writer's direction. "The show of yours I really loved was a couple of seasons ago. *The Floyd Yunkis Story*."

"It was a gem."

"Now there was a concept. Based on a real life story about an escaped serial killer who became a standup comic. It, you know, combined the best elements of *The Fugitive* with *Seinfeld*," she said. "How long was that on for?"

"Six weeks," he answered. "We were on opposite *Terminal Illness* that season, a bad break."

"Well, good luck with the new one. Malomar Productions is very interested in *my* script, by the way." She smiled and moved along.

"You cannot lead a life of this quality in Des Moines, Iowa," observed Mike, watching the waitress walk away.

"Probably not."

"Okay, back to reality. What criminous scheme has Casey McLeod ensnared you in now?"

"Her damned house burned down, Mike. She simply needs someplace to stay for awhile."

He frowned at his friend. "I thought you were a Christian."

"Nope, I let my membership lapse." Holding up his left hand, Mike started ticking off fingers. "Let me—which is what level-headed buddies are for—let me remind you of the earlier messes this wench got you into. There was the instance of Grandma Lizzie's pearls, for one. If I hadn't been thick with that lady in the D.A.'s office, you both might've been sent—"

"Grandma *Elsie*."

"What difference does it make? She doesn't have a Grandma Lizzie or a Grandma *Elsie*."

"Just because she's an orphan, that doesn't mean—"

"You don't even know for sure she's an orphan. She only told you she was." He tapped another finger. "Then there were those bearer bonds she allegedly stumbled on whilst innocently jogging along the beach in Malibu. Turned out those were glommed from a hapless messenger who got bopped on the coco in Bel Air."

"Nobody ever accused Casey of having anything to do with the theft of those bonds."

"That's because she made such a brilliant defense. She crossed her terrific legs, leaned over so far that each and every

cop got a splendid view down the front of her—"

"C'mon, Mike." He reached across the table to put his hand on his friend's arm, the way a guest does when he wants the talk show host to shut up. "Listen, it's simply that I don't know. There's something about Casey. She's not like any other woman I've ever run into, including the one I was married to for three years."

"I understand that Typhoid Mary had similar qualities, likewise Lizzie Borden."

"It's already settled. She's staying with me for awhile."

"They ought to start a Casey Anonymous organization," suggested his friend. "Hell, she's slept with enough guys to guarantee quite a membership. You could help each other shake the—"

"Quit it."

"Okay, sorry." He touched another finger. "The business with Justin Crouch's Jaguar."

"He lent it to her."

"The Santa Monica law thought otherwise."

"It was settled quietly. She wasn't arrested."

"All right, I admit I don't see in her what you do, but... well, no, rewrite that. She is very attractive, sure, but she is also monumental trouble, old buddy," warned Mike. "If you could think about this ratio-

nally, you'd realize you have to boot her right out your door. You're thriving at Sparey Art, you can afford to treat her to an extended stay at a posh motel. Just make sure it's a hostelry some distance from Santa Rita Beach."

"Eventually I will. Right now, though, I more or less promised her I'd help her on a project."

"Bank job or supermarket heist?"

"She has a chance to get hired as an assistant to Buzz Beckworth."

"The old boy who draws the *Rick the Rascal* panel? Hell, he's running in a thousand or so newspapers. There's also that animated kid show, and a movie's in the works," Mike said. "Why would he want an assistant whose drawings look like they were turned out by a nervous worm who accidentally crawled through a puddle of ink?"

"Her stuff's improved a lot the last couple of years."

"A one hundred percent improvement would still leave her a few notches below godawful."

"The sample *Rick the Rascal* panels she did aren't bad."

"Ah, I see what you're going to do, sappo. Ghost the stuff for her so she'll get this job. Once she does, you'll have to help her

out until the last syllable of recorded time."

"No, all I'm doing is helping her polish her samples. She gets the job, she's on her own."

"Sure, sure." He shook his head. "Anyhow, I heard that Beckworth is way up in his sixties and is pretty much a recluse these days. Lives in a Moroccan mansion in Beverly Hills, place with a high stone wall around it and broken glass along the top. Sort of dwelling Norma Desmond or Dr. X would love to sublet."

"Turns out he's a distant relative of a friend of hers. The friend told him about Casey and set up the interview."

"Are these people also related to Grandma Elsie?"

"I know I complained to you about some of the rough times I had when Casey and I lived together before," he admitted. "I've changed since then, and I think Casey has, too."

"You're likely to get hurt again, buddy."

"Not this time, no."

"Remind me to interview you sometime for a new book I'm planning to write," said Mike. "It's entitled *How to Win at Russian Roulette*."

**C**hance is what fouls you up, spoils your plans, and disrupts your tranquility. The

return of Casey McLeod to Wes's household had, initially, gone very well, and if he hadn't happened to be listening to his car radio while driving home from the animation studio on that chill, for L.A., late afternoon in mid-November, his life might well have continued smoothly for awhile longer.

He'd done quite a bit of work on the sample *Rick the Rascal* panels, and they'd turned out looking very much as though they'd been drawn by the reclusive Buzz Beckworth himself. Casey's wrist was still bothering her considerably, and so Wes, who was a very gifted artist, had done most of the penciling and inking on the newest batch of panels. He'd found Beckworth's scratchy style easy to imitate.

And apparently the cartoonist was satisfied with the work. He'd hired Casey. She was also coming up with the gag ideas for the cartoons, and for each completed panel he used, the cartoonist paid her two hundred dollars. Not a fortune, but it added up to a pretty fair salary for Casey.

Turned out she'd stored some boxes and suitcases with a friend in Long Beach before starting to house sit for the Mirandas, and those provided clothes and household goods for her. An old friend in Pasadena

was dating a guy who worked for a car lot, and he got her a special deal on the lease of a red Mitsubishi two-door. All in all, by the middle of November everything was going well. Wes and his guest had started sharing his bedroom the third night she was there.

But then he happened to hear an interview on the local NPR station he always listened to while driving across Greater Los Angeles, and that unsettled him considerably.

Casey wasn't there when he got home at the front end of twilight. He paced the living room and kitchen, drinking down several cups of herb tea, muttering, reciting the speeches he intended to deliver to her.

"Having a nervous breakdown?" she inquired when she came in at nightfall and dropped her portfolio on the sofa. "I heard you babbling from all the way outside."

"Where were you?"

Her eyes went wide. "Are you ticked off about something?"

"As a matter of fact."

"Well, it can't have a darn thing to do with me," Casey said. "I drove over to Buzz's to deliver the latest drawings, which he loves and adores, by the way. Then I drove down to talk with Roy Pomeroy about the next issue of *Bertha the*



*Biker.* Going to have to postpone that because of my darned wrist." She'd abandoned the sling long since, but still wore an elastic bandage around the injured wrist. She rubbed at that now.

He took a slow breath in and, as slowly, exhaled. "I heard an interesting interview on the radio this afternoon."

"It must've been if it's got you so fired up."

"Yeah, they were talking to Carlos Miranda."

"See? I told you he existed."

"He does, yes. He's on a tour to promote his latest novel, *Sixty-one Years of Misfortune and Sorrow.*"

"Carlos writes fairly grim stuff."

"One of the most fascinating parts of this interview was when he mentioned that this was his very first trip, ever, to Southern California," continued Wes. "He's lived in Taos, New Mexico, for the past five years."

"I wonder why he's denying having lived here?" She frowned, rubbing at her wrist again. "Probably some sort of trauma induced by the fire."

"Carlos Miranda also mentioned that he's gay."

"Yes, I was aware of that. Carmelita's very understanding and they—"

"No, nope, won't work, Casey. There is no Carmelita. No, this guy lives in New Mexico with a photographer named Earl." He paused, eyed the young woman for a few seconds. "So?"

She sighed and shrugged simultaneously. "That's the trouble with fibbing, isn't it? Some little unimportant—"

"Little? You've spun a massive falsehood here."

"Okay, I did." She sighed again, looking very contrite. "The biggest mistake I ever made in my life was moving out on you. When the fires started up this year, it struck me as something I could use to arrange a comeback. You're such a decent, understanding man that I was sure you wouldn't throw me out if I pretended to be homeless."

"How can I have an opportunity to be understanding when all you do is tell me unmitigated baloney?"

"Wes, things have worked out fine, haven't they? So why look a gift house in the mouth?"

"Horse," he corrected. "Your car didn't explode."

"Well, no. That's it out in the driveway."

"There's no friend who's being romanced by a car salesman in Pasadena."

"I made that up, rather than having to explain—"

"What about Rasmussen?"

"Who?"

"The kindly trucker who rescued you from the blazing hills of Maravilla Canyon and delivered you to my doorstep."

"He's fictitious, too. Actually I drove over in my car and parked it around the corner." She took a few careful steps in his direction. "The thing is, Wes, we're both happy now. I think it's great we're back together, and I promise I won't fib any more."

"Where the hell does Buzz Beckworth come in? Did you make that up, too?"

She turned away, walked over, and sat on the sofa. "I was hoping you weren't going to ask about him," she admitted forlornly, tapping her forefinger on the portfolio clasp.

"This stuff I've been diligently aping—you actually take it to him?"

"Six panels a week. Yes, that part's all true."

"But?"

Casey folded her hands in her lap and studied them. "Okay, I suppose I'd better explain the whole mess to you," she said slowly. "Yes, I owe it to you."

"Did you steal something from the guy?"

"No, nothing like that," she assured him. "It's only that, well, I've known Buzz some-

what longer than I let on to you." Her eyes avoided his. "I was living with him, we were lovers for about six months."

"He's a recluse. How'd—"

"A relative of his really did introduce us because Buzz was looking for some help on the panel. That led to the rest of it," she explained. "But I really have been his assistant. I started drawing *Rick the Rascal* before Buzz and I ever became close—and I've kept on."

"So what happened? How'd you get here?"

"Just a minute." She held up her good hand. "I think I had also better tell you that I'm actually getting five hundred dollars per panel. I told you two hundred because I wanted you to think I'd only just started—and that sounded more like a starting salary."

He went over, feet dragging some, and sat in an armchair. "Why am I drawing it?"

"Well, when I decided the romance was over and I wanted to move out, Buzz was really very nice about everything," she told him. "He said I could keep on being his assistant even if I wasn't going to live with him any more. So now all I have to do is visit his place in Beverly Hills once a week—as I did today—to talk about gag ideas and turn in the finished drawings."

"Your wrist is really sprained?"

"Well, of course. That happened while I was moving out. I took a fall when I was toting a couple of heavy suitcases down to the car," she said. "I wanted to move back in with you anyway, and since you're such a terrific artist and could help out, why, that was an extra bonus for me."

"I would've helped you, you know, even if you'd arrived fully clothed and told me the straight truth right off."

She looked directly at him. "I really did start off intending to be honest with you. But somehow inventing things is more fun." She stood up, lifting her portfolio off the sofa. "I'll move out tonight if you want."

He shook his head. "No, I'd like you to stay." He stood and moved closer to her. "But try to control your imagination, huh?"

"I will, honest." Smiling, she kissed him.

**O**n the day before Thanksgiving, Wes was in his office at Sparey Art, getting ready for an early departure. He was standing next to his desk, tucking a bottle of Casey's favorite California chardonnay into his attaché

case, when Mike Filchuck entered unannounced.

"Sit down," he advised, holding up a folded newspaper in his left hand.

"Don't have much time, Mike. I promised Casey I'd—"

"Park and listen." He put his hand on Wes's shoulder and urged him down into his desk chair. He perched on the edge of the desk. His orange lumberjack jacket gave off a mildew scent.

"What's wrong? Trouble with *Glickman in Remission*?"

"We're calling it *No Worse Than a Bad Cold* now, but that's beside the point." Unfurling the newspaper, he spread it out on the desktop. "I assume you haven't seen today's news sheet?"

"Nope, why?"

Mike's stubby finger jabbed at a story just below the fold. The headline read **CARTOONIST KIN IN BIZARRE FRAUD.**

"This is about Buzz Beckworth," Wes realized before reading the accompanying story.

"Exactly." Mike snatched up the paper. "I've perused the yarn several times and added to my store of knowledge by listening to newscasts while racing hither to Studio City," he explained. "I'll give you a lucid summary."

"Hey, I'm capable of reading a—"

"Pay attention now." The writer thrust the newspaper up under his arm. "Buzz Beckworth is dead."

"Damn. Was he murdered?"

"Thus far the authorities think it was natural causes. But the fact I'd like you to dwell on is this, old buddy—Buzz has been dead, the coroner estimates, since October thirtieth or thereabouts."

Wes straightened up, frowning. "Hey, that can't be right. Casey was over there just the day before yesterday, turning in the week's work," he told his friend. "And she got a check for three thousand dollars, signed by Beckworth. I saw the damn thing."

Nodding, Mike said, "All part of the bizarre fraud."

"Do they mention her in this thing?" He reached toward the paper.

Mike maintained his hold on it. "No, nobody seems to know about her yet. Now stop heckling and listen to my narration," he suggested. "Okay, a nephew of Buzz Beckworth's was apparently one of the few people the old recluse allowed into his manse. On or about October thirtieth of this present year, this lad found his uncle deceased, probably from a heart attack. The old gent was the

prime source of this fellow's income. He runs a shabby comic book company down in—"

"Pomeroy." He shot to his feet. "His name is Roy Pomeroy, isn't it?"

"It is, yep. Know him?"

"No, but he publishes *Bertha the Biker*."

"Ah yes, that collection of hen scratches that Casey McLeod claims is cartooning. That's the Pomeroy in question, sure enough."

Wes drifted over to his drawing board, looked down unseeingly at the storyboard tacked there. "Go on."

"Roy decided that if he could stow his uncle's body someplace around there, he ought to be able to turn a pretty penny for awhile," said Mike. "He did a lot of the old gent's banking for him anyway. The income on the *Rick the Rascal* property—daily newspaper panel, comic books, TV, toys, and such—comes to about two hundred thousand per month."

"A tidy sum."

"And that'd go mostly to charity once Buzz officially passed on to glory," Mike went on. "By doing a little simple forgery, Roy Pomeroy—a melodious name, isn't it?—Roy Pomeroy diverted a fair amount of that monthly loot out of Uncle Buzz's accounts and into his own pockets. I am

supposing that dear Casey got her fair share."

Wes sank down into his drawing board chair, resting his elbows on the slanting board. "But Roy had a big problem. In order to maintain the illusion that Buzz was still alive, somebody had to keep drawing the damned panel."

"When Buzz shuffled off, he was probably a few weeks ahead. That gave Roy a little lead time to dig up a sub to ghost the stuff for him. He needed, keep in mind, a ghost who wasn't annoyingly honest," Mike elaborated. "I'm certain Casey was the first person he thought of to do the job for him."

"But she knew she wasn't up to drawing anything like that." Wes shook his head. "Those penciled samples she passed off on me as her own were probably drawn by Buzz right before he died."

"My guess, too. Roy offered her money, three thousand a week or probably more, if she'd turn out *Rick the Rascal* for him."

"And she realized immediately that I'd be the perfect person actually to do the job."

"This latest yarn she handed you, old chum, about being Buzz's lover, wasn't true either."

"How'd they tumble to what Roy was up to?"

"Chance. The fellow who comes around every two months to service the air-conditioning system dropped by yesterday while Roy was out. He let himself into the basement with the key Buzz had given him, and while he was attending to his chores, he noticed a strange odor. He poked around until he found the corpse where it'd been stashed."

"And Roy hasn't implicated Casey at all?"

"He's claiming he produced the fake panels by tracing parts of old drawings and combining them in new ways. That—"

"The checks she showed me. Those'll link her to—"

"I'm betting those were just window dressing, old chum. Part of the con and never meant to be cashed," said Mike, tapping himself on the elbow with the rolled-up paper. "I'll also wager that Roy is going to protect the lady and never say she helped him with his bizarre fraud. Guys, most of them I've noticed, tend to feel protective about her. Have you noticed that, too?"

"She'll get away clear."

"Once again."

He rose, very slowly, to his feet. "I'll head home. Ask her to leave."

"Don't weaken. And happy Thanksgiving."

Wes gave him the bottle of wine and left. When he arrived at his beach cottage, Casey's car wasn't in the driveway. All her clothes were gone from the bedroom, along with the dishware and the blender she'd brought. The only items of hers she left behind were three Carlos Miranda paperbacks in the living room bookcase.

Steepled on the coffee table was a copy of the day's paper. There was no note, no goodbye message.

As predicted, Roy Pomeroy never mentioned her during his trial or sentencing.

And Wes didn't hear from Casey again for nearly a year and a half.

But that's another story.

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# Ride a Red Horse

by Dan Crawford

**O**ne foot up, breathe in. Foot down, breathe out. Other foot up, breathe in. Foot down, breathe out. Just keep moving.

Poliijn's face was dripping, and it felt at times as though the sweat was running straight down to her boots. But there was no shelter on the treeless plain; the only way out of this was to walk on.

The sweat might freeze, eventually, as night advanced and the cold, sloppy mush became frozen snow. But it might be less work to slip across that than through this quagmire of heavy, clinging goo, shindeep outside her boots and wellnigh ankledeep inside.

Poliijn actually liked this kind of weather, within the bounds of enthusiasm. A few hours of concentrated misery put one's life into perspective. This morning she'd been so hungry she'd wondered whether she'd mind being dead. Now that survival was really an issue, hunger was a gentle dream.

She stumbled over some discarded boot or clump of frozen

weeds. Everything was snow, everywhere. The wind was in league with it, whipping it up and around so that was all you could see or hear.

Poliijn set both feet together and tipped her head to one side, pulling her hood back a bit. Her ears were trained to pick things out in a roomful of singing people, so they ought to work just as well here. Surely that had been the sound of a bell.

There! She trudged in the direction of the sound. Even a lost cow would be some shelter.

Now she heard a second bell, pitched lower. Two cows, each with a different bell? But most bells in these regions would have been made by the same bellsmith, to a single pattern, and would sound alike. No reason there couldn't be two bell-makers in a region, though, or itinerant bellsmiths, moving at random. That could even be the bellsmith's cart now, with samples hanging outside.

Poliijn was trying to talk herself out of what she thought the bells really were; she was far too soggy to deal with disappointment. But what rose be-



fore her was either a mighty even snowbank or a white wall. Nearer, and she could make out the dark splotch that had to be a door and, to the left of it, three bells: the big one on top, the small one in the middle, and the intermediate bell on the bottom, an arrangement so ancient that only the wizards knew what it had originally signified. If they knew.

All Polijn needed now were the doorknocker and the cry of "Enter, friend!"

The doorknocker was there. And, after she'd used the knocker, so was the cry.

The big door swung back. "Why, my lad!" exclaimed a tall man. His eyes searched the storm outside for any companions the visitor might have. "Whatever can you be doing out alone on such a night?"

"I am Polijn," she informed him. "A minstrel."

"Ah, another." He stepped aside to let her pass. "I am Anderal, abbot of this place."

Polijn moved inside. "My thanks cannot be numbered," she told him. "I was afraid I was going to be buried before I was quite ready."

Anderal moved back to bar the doors again. "No thanks are necessary, lad." Polijn watched to see how the bar worked. Then her eyes swept the little entry room for weapons and

hiding places: his or, at need, hers.

The Northern Quilt was dotted with religious shelters into which men or women retreated to contemplate other worlds that might or might not be. This could be a far less hazardous and more rewarding career than getting involved in the politics that had resulted in the crazy quilt of little countries. Their policy was to offer shelter to travelers without asking payment, as an offering to their god or gods. But some of them offered shelter so that travelers could be robbed and murdered in the night in case their god or gods needed the money.

Anderal was a tall man in a white robe that featured a red horse's head stitched onto the back. She rather thought she liked him, as he held out a hand to escort her into the shelter. She did not take the hand, though: liking was not necessarily trust.

"Where are you from, lad?" he inquired, accepting this without a blink. "And where are you bound?"

She raised her hands. "I'm bound wherever the wind is kinder, good abbot. Most recently, I'm from Oduvon."

"Ah, Oduvon." He inclined his head. "Quite the walk, lad."

Polijn didn't correct the "lad." She didn't tell him where



POLIYN KNEW WHERE SHE WAS ONLY WHEN SHE SAW THE CROSSROADS  
SHRINE LOOMING AHEAD.

she was from, either. Rossacotta had such a reputation for villainy that some people, hearing she'd been there, were willing to stone her to death for fear she'd do worse to them.

Anderal extended a hand toward a small door at the other end of the small chamber. "Were you able to see Lady Denut at Oduvon, lad?" His eyes went up and down her as she moved forward.

She had, in fact, and was able to discuss her recent wedding with enough detail to convince him she actually had been there.

As a public figure, Polijn was accustomed to being eyed for all sorts of reasons; minstrels were regarded as demideities in some regions, and fair game in others. And even in her childhood days on the streets of Malbeth, she'd have recognized the look in Anderal's eyes—he was sizing her up for weapons and other possible threats. His questioning came from the same source: in the Northern Quilt, it was essential to know where people came from, where they were going, and what they meant to do.

The abbot seemed to feel his visitor was acceptable. He opened the little door, which led into a shadowy passage, and said, "It is not necessary for you to do homage to Our

Lord Horse, if such is contrary to your own vows."

Polijn had no vows, particularly, and knew the proper answer, no matter how amiable her host might be. "I would certainly do homage to one who has saved me from this weather."

He guided her through a short hall to a pair of dark wooden doors. The shapes of men in battle array had been carved into the doors. Polijn added this to her store of information. These war cults could be exhausting audiences, but in general did not slay guests out of hand. She had heard stories, of course, of visitors' being forced to prove themselves in arena combat.

Anderal pulled the doors open. The shrine behind the doors was carved of the same dark wood. No arms hung on the walls; Polijn wondered if this might not, instead, simply be a little temple that the local duke's soldiers would visit on their way to battle.

The only thing clearly visible in the gloom was a bright red horse that sat on a high shelf between two branches of red candles. Polijn checked the walls: all the warriors depicted in the carvings were mounted. "Our Lord Horse"—it was a natural choice of deity for cavalry.

Anderal stepped up to the enshrined statue and bowed. He stood up straight and set one hand between his eyes, with the fingers pointed up but the thumb folded under. The other hand was cupped behind his left ear. Then he set both hands over his mouth and made half a curtsy.

When he moved to the side, Polijn took up a place a few steps behind where he had been and copied his actions. She performed the ritual with a little reluctance, lest she be guilty of presumption for using the advanced form allowed only to abbots. (There might even be a ban on women's doing it at all, which could mean trouble if he stopped calling her "lad.")

She looked to him when she finished. The abbot smiled, and she smiled back. "I'm new at that," she told him.

He nodded. "At that, you did better than our other guest, who is an adept, he says. But the frost may be in his bones, as he said, walking miles from Spezales. Or it may have been hunger. He emptied six bowls. Yours is hungry work, I believe."

He led her from the small room to a larger one. Here, in another niche, was something Polijn found far easier to revere: a cooking pot hot among the coals.

Anderal took a plate and a mug from the cabinet next to the fireplace and served her himself. "Are you alone on evening duty, then?" Polijn inquired.

"Only for a little longer," he told her, ladling steaming noodles onto the plate. "Then Brother Pinyd takes my place. I must be awake at dawn to supervise breakfast for our many residents."

Polijn smiled. He had slipped that in so deftly, how he might look solitary, but actually had, oh, dozens of followers to call on in case she was studying the shelter as advance agent for a band of robbers.

"So large a religious shelter should jump to my memory at once," she replied as he set plate and mug before her. "But I am so lost I have no idea where I am, even to the names of the nearest villages."

The abbot nodded. "You are not entirely to be blamed, lad. We are not one of the great landmarks of this county. But you will surely have heard of the Crossroads Shrine, not two miles west of us, past the lone tree. And beyond that, the castle of the Duke of Molian, whose armies guard the western border. The year's-end festivals begin tomorrow with the duke's procession to the shrine.

He means to bring us a mighty cheese as our annual gift."

From the reverence in his voice when he mentioned the cheese, Polijn guessed that this shelter was occupied by a vegetarian sect. Certainly the noodles and parsnips on her plate agreed. And most noblemen on a year's-end procession would have offered venison as their donation to the shelter's continued well-being.

Not that Polijn was prejudiced against vegetables. This was the best meal she'd been offered in a week, and she said so. Anderal accepted the compliment but was more interested in discussing the places she'd been recently than what she'd eaten.

They talked for some time, until Polijn's third yawn alerted the abbot to the hour. "You'll be weary after walking through the snow," he said, rising. "No, lad, leave the plates; I'll take care of them later. Our guest room is down this hall. We have only one other guest tonight, a minstrel like yourself, as I mentioned. You'll have your choice of beds."

He opened a door into a large dormitory. Beds stood in niches in the walls around a low-burning, smoky hearth. It was a little chilly, but Polijn could see that each bed was stacked with quilts.

Something moved, despite their care in stepping inside. "Hey-ho!" called a voice. "Time to eat?"

Polijn's heart sank. Anderal called, "No, good sir, only another minstrel." He lit a splinter at the hearth to give Polijn a little extra light, now that the other guest was awake.

"Well," said the same hearty voice, "it's the kitling!"

The face matched the voice: an unruly thatch of hair, a square nose, an eyepatch. It was, indeed, Carasta, who had taken Polijn under his protection when both were banished from Rössacotta. He had promised to teach her a few things and to shield her from the dangers of traveling alone. One of the things Polijn had learned from Carasta was that there could be worse things than traveling alone.

"I was afraid we'd lost each other for good!" he called.

It had been good. Anderal, seeing Polijn hesitate, stepped up next to her, in case the two minstrels were rivals. Polijn simply waited with resignation for Carasta to call, "Come tuck yourself in next to me. It'll be warmer."

But instead the one-eyed man settled back onto his cot. "We'll chat in the morning," he called. "Nice to see you."

Polijn shrugged and moved to a niche in the opposite wall. It could mean only one thing: Carasta had some money on him that he didn't want her to know about. The abbot looked to her for a sign that this was really all the minstrels were going to do. She nodded, and he moved out.

Polijn was a light sleeper; it was one of the skills necessary for survival in Rossacotta. She woke briefly during the night, hearing footsteps. Once again, though, Carasta did not seem inclined to seek out her company. Not being one to question a blessing, Polijn went back to sleep.

She rose early the next morning, but no earlier than Carasta, and was subjected to a detailed description of all his recent travels as they consumed a steaming breakfast of milk and meal. "So naturally, using the innkeeper's directions, I was lost in no time," he declared, thumping the table for emphasis. "Fortunately, I walked smack into the wall of this fine establishment and was treated to as fine a meal as I've had in weeks. Two of the finest meals, counting this one. They really do quite well at this place with such a small staff: just four religious and ten others, laymen mainly who want a warm job inside for the winter.

Workhorses, they are, though, not lazy louts: keeping the place clean, doing proper honor to powers beyond theirs, and with deliveries from the duke only once a month."

Polijn raised an eyebrow. "You've learned a lot about this shelter." She didn't ask why he'd bothered, except with that eyebrow.

He saw it, though, even with one eye. "One pays one's debts with song in this business," he replied, lifting his chin imperiously. "I've got the beginnings of a lyric in my head."

Carasta wouldn't have a lyric in his head even if the skull were opened and the manuscript inserted by hand, a process Polijn had sometimes daydreamed about. But whatever he did have in mind, he wasn't ready to explain yet.

When he'd cleaned up all the food that was available, he took one of Polijn's wrists and sought out Anderal, who was still on gate duty in a cubicle next to the big door. "Many thanks for your hospitality, good abbot," said the minstrel. "But we must certainly be on our way early if we are to make the duke's palace in time to take our places in the grand celebration."

Anderal nodded but asked, "Must you both go?" Being of a similarly practical mind, Polijn

could see that the abbot would like to have a minstrel or two on hand for some kind of fanfare when the duke's party arrived. But he couldn't ask them to stay, for that would be as much as asking for payment in service for their room and meals.

"The lad could stay," he went on.

Carasta winked, though whether at her or at Anderal Polijn could not tell. "Ah, the lad's not too young to want to make a bit of money," he replied. "And we'll make more if we sing for His Lordship and then accompany him back here. When we return, we'll have a song to sing of your hospitality that will surely double his donations."

Anderal disavowed any necessity for this and passed them as a parting gift a cloth bag with a loaf of bread and a few herbs inside. Then he unbarred the door.

The storm had ended in the night, and the air was warmer with the sun shining through it. The going was wet and sloppy, though, through half-melting snow shindeep. The increasing weight on her lower legs as they soaked up the moisture was augmented by the pounding in her head as Carasta sang tunelessly a song that had once possessed a per-

fectly good melody. The big fraud's sunny mood did not warm her at all. He had worn just this same expression the afternoon he made the deal to rent her to a goblin merchant for the night, neglecting to mention this to her until dusk. He was working on some kind of scheme. Polijn hoped she could do something to spoil it.

Revenge was not practical. Polijn had never been one to go out of her way to repay injuries. But the minstrel's plot probably involved hard work for her and/or some kind of loss or injury to Anderal. Averting any new injuries to oneself or to someone who had helped one was very practical.

At midmorning they reached the crossroads Anderal had spoken of, and Carasta pulled her into the shadowed nook inside the high stone shrine. "Silly to save this bread for lunch when we'll be in the middle of a party by that time," he said. "Come on."

The shadows were easy on the eye after a morning's trudge through sunlit snow. And the opening apparently faced away from the prevailing winds, for the floor was dry. Little horses were carved all over the interior and on the surface of a little table inside. Carasta hoisted himself onto the center of this and hauled the bread



from his pack. There wasn't quite room there for Polijn to sit, but he did allow her to cut the bread on the available free space.

"You'll soon be eating better than this," he told her through a mouthful of the bread.

Polijn nodded. "One supper with the duke and another with the abbot," she said, doing her best to sound enthusiastic. Carasta was much more amenable to questions if he thought you were with him.

"You don't think far enough ahead," he told her, shaking his chunk of bread in her direction. "Lucky you have me." He reached for his pack. "We're not going back to the shelter."

He opened the pack and showed her why. Polijn had been wondering why he hadn't made her carry both packs.

"This horse is one solid shup-tit ruby," he told her, stroking the head of the idol. He shook his own head. "Pity we can't sell it up to the castle, but that's way too close. We can nose around and find out where the next closest customer might be."

Polijn did not reply, just stared at the immense jewel. One of the problems with Carasta's plots was that he thought too far ahead. If he had applied his great brain to the near future, he would have

known the abbot's men were bound to come after them. There was a limited number of suspects in the theft, after all. Or, if this was a nonviolent sect, they had only to send a runner to the duke. Nobody who could survive as duke in these parts was likely to be nonviolent. And if he was as devout as Anderal believed, there would soon be two fewer minstrels and quite a few untidy piles of bone and flesh in the snow.

"Nobody's going to stop and pray on a holiday," Carasta went on, covering up the horse again. "Way too busy. And by the time they do notice their god's gone, we'll be headed in another direction."

He hopped down from the table. "Well, let's see about this duke. We're for warm food and plenty of good music now."

A loud and unmusical clang brought them both around the corner of the shrine. "That'll be cowbells on the duke's herd," said Carasta without much conviction.

From this side of the shrine, they could also make out the sound of someone singing even worse than Carasta, which Polijn would not have thought humanly possible. She nodded as she caught sight of the lone figure. That explained all: it wasn't human.

A creature six feet tall and a good four feet around was marching cheerfully through the snow. A large pack sat high on his shoulders, and as he sang, he whacked a soup pot with a ladle, less to advertise his wares (who was out in the snow to buy from him?) than because he was enjoying the noise. Dyed and figured leather was all he wore in the way of clothes, more as armor and ornament than for protection from the cool air.

Polijn pulled back out of sight, but Carasta stepped clear of the shrine and raised an arm. "Hlar!" he shouted.

"Hlar!" the goblin merchant hollered back, waving the ladle. Speeding up, he reached the shrine in seconds and dealt Carasta a welcoming buffet on the shoulder with the same ladle.

"Arrh, but it's a lonely dodge, selling up north!" he said, wincing not at all as Carasta shoved a fist against his chest. "Dirklad's the name, spices the ware. What's yours, and how's business?"

"Carasta and Polijn," Carasta told him, reaching back to pull Polijn into sight. "The greatest minstrels in the north, when we're in the north. Business will be better once we reach the duke's celebration, and better still if we can avail

ourselves of your fine percussion."

The goblin answered with a barrage of clangs. "First human I've met with such an ear!" He swung the ladle again and congratulated Carasta on the other shoulder. "Let's go!"

Carasta and Dirklad set off without any further discussion and Polijn followed, largely because Carasta still had a hand clamped around her left wrist. She studied Dirklad's face, just to make sure this wasn't the same goblin Carasta had had dealings with before. She'd marked that one. Dirklad was a new one, though, as far as she could see. What was it about Carasta that attracted the creatures? Or about the goblins that attracted Carasta? He could be haughty enough with other merchants, a class he considered beneath him. In general, the minstrel was only this jovial when he saw a prospect for profit.

"I don't see much of your partner back there," Dirklad declared. "Why don't you walk in front, missy, so's I can get a good look at you?" Carasta pulled her forward.

"Arrrh, yes," the goblin went on. "I knew a lass like you once. So pretty she was that the witches were jealous and had to put a curse on her, sure as the ocean cries, 'Sink!' Everywhere

she went, she had to sing and dance: no talking or walking, just singing and dancing. She made some money, of course, but one day she went walking through the woods, and her song attracted a bear. He went after her and she couldn't run away, she could only dance as quick as she could."

He paused there to scratch behind one ear.

This was a story Polijn had not heard before. "What then?" she asked, her professional interest aroused.

Dirklad shrugged. "She wasn't the first minstrel to dance with a bear behind!" Carasta guffawed along with the goblin as Dirklad swung the ladle down to give her a swat of camaraderie. This was going to be another long walk.

They finally reached the ducal palace shortly after midday, hearing it long before they saw it. Other latecomers were moving through the gate of a walled enclosure; they joined the procession. Inside, fires and food were set all around the courtyard, among people who obviously were no more afraid of chill winter breezes than Dirklad. The newcomers were greeted by the crowd of merry-makers with glee on general principle, but when Carasta announced that they were a company of minstrels, as well

as adepts in the worship of Our Lord Horse, mighty exultation was the result.

"Take them to His Grace!"

"His Grace'll want to hear them first!"

The celebrants dragged them toward the main building until they reached an aisle blocked by rings of spectators watching two burly men with sabers performing a sword dance around a woman with a broadsword. "Here now," called Carasta, "I'm all for a bit of fun, but I'm supposed to be presented to His Grace."

"Aye, good minstrel," someone from the crowd told him. "As soon as His Grace is done dancing."

It seemed they were not destined to enter the stone keep at all. The big, muscled man with bare arms and a long beard was His Grace Duke Burgo, while his no less muscled but clean-shaven partner was his brother Perlo. The woman hoisting the six foot sword over her head was their sister Chilia, who was perfectly enchanted with the new arrivals. "Ah, it would have been no true festival without minstrels," she exclaimed, tossing her arms around each of the three in turn. "And just in time for the ceremony of the gift exchange." Carasta's eyes gleamed, though the hug had

left him too out of breath for a reply.

Polijn could detect very little actual ceremony in the swirling exchanges that followed. People just turned to each other and started swapping golden ornaments or coins or small bits of pottery. There was undoubtedly some system, so no one received more than one token from the same person, but Polijn didn't know the people well enough to pick it out. Standing close enough to the fire to warm and dry her legs, she braced herself to receive some of this loot herself. There was no trouble returning gifts; they were perfectly content with a song in exchange for a trinket. Polijn leaned heavily on those songs involving horses or paying proper respect to one's deities.

She kept her eyes on her undesired allies. Carasta was receiving rather more and larger gifts, having again announced himself as an adept of Our Lord Horse. "Yes, I was stolen from good Abbot Anderal's shelter as a child, though I had undergone many years of study up to that point. Villainous Rossacottans carried me away to their evil country, where they wanted me to marry some princess or another." Carasta had always lied with more imagination than probability, but

Chilia and several others were hanging on his words, feeling the story was worth everything they'd given.

Dirklad was doing very well for himself, too. In return for the gifts he was handed he gave little packets of cinnamon or pepper, realizing rather more this way than he would have from the actual sale of the spices.

Polijn was waiting for the ruby horse to spill out of Carasta's pack. He kept shoving his gifts into the pack as he got them; surely a gleam of ruby must give him away. If that didn't happen, she expected one of Anderal's followers to come running up to Duke Burgo, with news that would turn this into a really wild party.

None of that happened. She did not, however, like the way Carasta and Dirklad seemed to keep finding each other in the crowd, or the way Carasta kept pointing to her. Wasn't he making enough profit already?

She spotted a short man with an unruly shock of hair pushing his way through the crowd to Duke Burgo. Since he wore the duke's livery, she doubted he could have come from the shelter. But she slid over toward them, just in case he had a message from the abbot.

"The guards have been chosen for the southern road, Your Grace," he was saying.

"Cards?" the duke asked, knocking mud from his boots.

"Fistfight, actually," his retainer replied. "The winners are ready to take up their places any time Your Grace gives the order."

Grinning, the duke ran a hand through his hair. "Well, no point in their setting out before the Blessing of the Great Gift. We've got all the singing to go, and we're not but half done with our own gifts yet. Wait till dark."

"Very good, Your Grace," said the shorter man.

The duke rubbed his hands together. "This year," he chortled, "nobody's going to take the shortcut and get to the shrine before the rest of us."

His servant nodded. "I still believe, begging Your Grace's pardon, that it would be best to take the whole procession around by the southern road. It's only slightly longer than the straight road to the shelter, and if you take into account the work of getting through the snow that hasn't been cleared . . ."

"Fiddle!" cried the duke. "We've always taken the east road, snow or no snow, and it won't stop us this year."

"Very well," said the smaller man with a shrug. "I will have the two crowns ready in case Your Grace and His Honor

your brother reach it at the same time."

The duke thumped the red-haired man's nearest shoulder. "You take such good care of us, Miskey."

"Hey!"

Polijn turned to find Carasta beckoning to her from a shadow at the side of the stables. She stepped back to join him there, whereupon he took hold of both her shoulders. This was a sign that he was ready to deliver some instructions.

"I know where they're going from here," he said, whispering even though no one was within twenty feet of the chilly, shadowed corner. "Listen. Nearly the whole caboodle will go to the shelter by the road we took. But there's another road, to the south. It didn't get as much of that slop on it last night, and it would be quicker going. That one gets within a hundred yards of the Crossroads Shrine, and then cuts off south. There's a road from the shrine to it; we can take that down. See, the first of them to touch the shrine gets crowned King of the Procession. It's supposed to be some big honor: the pizook has to sit in the shrine for the rest of the night. My bet is the duke just doesn't like to look old Holy Robes in the face when it turns out their big present is only a hunk of cheese. Anyway, while

they're busy with that business, we slip off on that path, get on the clean road to the south, and we're off with the profits." He jerked his head at the crowd. "Dirklad's coming with us."

"You told him what you've got?"

He gave her shoulders a shake. "Don't be dumb. I just told him I was afraid someone might be coming after us and did he know a way to throw them off the track. He's got a safe place he'll let us lie low in until we know if the duke or the abbot is following."

"Good of him." Polijn was sure there was a fee involved, and positive Dirklad wasn't interested in being paid in song. But instead of pressing Carasta to share these details, she asked, "Shouldn't we get some rest then, before we leave? We can't walk all morning, dance all day, and then walk all night."

Carasta let go of her hand and looked out at the crowd. "Nah. There's lots of presents to pick up yet."

"Not if they see that pack," she told him. "Can't you see how everybody's sneaking off to hide their presents now and then, so people will think they haven't been getting much?" Polijn did not, in fact, see this, but she hoped she could make

Carasta see it. "I mean, are you getting everything you deserve?"

The larger minstrel rubbed his chin. "No. No, I'm not. Is that the plan? You'll go off and guard this stuff and take a nap over it? Tuck it under your head, mind." He started to unstrap the pack from his back. "Yes, yes, quite right," he went on, his face now showing he thought so much of the idea it might as well be his. "You can't do all that walking and dancing and then walking again, you know. Better that you be well-rested. Yes."

He handed down the pack to her and jerked his head toward the stables. "This would be a good spot on a day in honor of Our Lord Horse." He gave her a wink and a mighty pinch.

Polijn rubbed the spot as she watched him go. She had actually been thinking of a hiding place much closer to the gate, but he'd given her a new idea as well. The duke's people were heaping up wood in a spot at a safe distance from all the outbuildings, naturally far from the stable. If they all meant to gather around a bonfire to sing, then as night came on a person could slip from the stables and move up along the wall to the gate. And it could be a person with a horse.

Polijn was unsure of her ability to outpace the procession on foot, especially if the duke had sentries she didn't know about. But if she could find a horse of reasonable size and speed, she might stand a better chance. Having sung at a number of executions, she knew well what they would do to her if she were caught stealing a horse. But it could hardly be any worse than what they'd do if she were caught with the ruby idol, no matter where she claimed to be taking it.

Polijn eased into the dark building, her eyes open for stable hands or anything else likely to object to a stranger's presence. Nothing presented itself, though a few large eyes turned to study her. She studied them back, adjusting Carasta's pack on her hip. Now, how could you tell which was the horse that would get you all the way there, and which the one that had a loose shoe, or would tire out after a few miles in the cold slush? Polijn's acquaintance with horses was limited. In her district, back home in Rossacotta, mighty few people could stand the expense of keeping a horse.

She supposed she could do worse than just pick one by color: a black or a dark gray would hide her best in the shadows by the wall. Moving

along the stalls, she had just about settled on a big, dark creature when she was startled by the sight of a familiar face. Those big nostrils, those little, little ears: that was a Rossacottan warhorse. Since Rossacotta had opened trade, their legendary warhorses were moving farther afield. The creature was a light grey, not exactly what she wanted, but the square, solid horses were known for speed and rumored to have nightsight. Their chief attribute, though, was endurance. That was what she'd want most on the road back to the religious shelter.

Setting Carasta's pack down, she studied the walls for the next piece of decision-making. She could hardly make it all the way there on a naked horse. Having also sung a great deal about horses, Polijn knew, in a general way, which pieces of harness went where. But it was largely theoretical knowledge, and since the songs mainly concentrated on the jewels and gold trim attached to the tackle rather than technical details, they weren't necessarily perfect guides.

She decided she'd have to settle for any kind of halter she could get around the horse's neck. Choosing some tackle at random, she took down the bits that looked reasonably adapt-



able and advanced on her chosen mount.

The warhorse watched her approach without any apparent interest. Polijn jumped back once when the creature drew back its lips to expose teeth a little bigger than Polijn thought necessary. But that was the extent of the horse's comment, and she went back to tying knots.

The job turned out to be much more time-consuming than she'd expected. The Rossacottan warhorse was considered small by warhorse standards, but it was still mighty large for her. And this horse seemed to grow a little every time she had to get a loop over it. Half the time she couldn't reach far enough, or throw the strip of leather far enough, and had to pick it up off the floor and start over. She had hoped there might be time for her to get an actual nap, but the stable grew darker and darker as she improvised her harness.

The only light coming in by the time she had the job done to her satisfaction was a flickering glow. She wiped her forehead and pulled up Carasta's pack. Fastening it to her own, she slipped to the door and peered outside.

The bonfire was lit, and the duke's subjects were gathered around it, hands joined. If she

could count on all of them being there, this scheme would work.

She hurried back inside. The time for planning and preparation was over. It was time now to get to work, and little enough time there was, too. She took hold of the halter and moved out.

She moved out a good foot and a half and then stopped. She looked up. The horse looked down.

"Come on!" she said, yanking on the leather. The horse tossed its head, yanking it back and out of her hand.

She took hold of it again and pulled some more, calling as loudly as she dared every starting command she'd ever heard in song or story, every way to pronounce "get up" or "go." Those little ears twitched enough to show the horse was paying attention, and she was willing to bet it understood, too. But it was just not inclined to go off with somebody it didn't know. That was a laudable habit in a warhorse, but Polijn would gladly have dispensed with such good training.

The business with the harness had been a complete waste of time. She'd have to head out on foot, now, not knowing how soon the partygoers would be ready to leave their bonfire. Polijn headed for the door, tossing the length of leather down

behind her and expressing in an undertone her opinion of the horse's physical state, its morals, the morals and even the species of its parents, and the likely abuses accorded in the afterworld to recalcitrant horses.

At the door, she paused to check the crowd. She didn't mean to wait long—there was no time to waste; even so she wasn't ready to move forward yet, but she was shoved from behind.

She whirled. The horse had come up behind her and stood now in the doorway, eyes fixed on her face.

What in the world had she done just now that she hadn't been doing before? She frowned. "Are you coming?" she demanded, and added a colloquial Rossacottan epithet that in one short syllable expressed the unlikely possibility that the listener was a large amount of body waste addicted to unnatural sexual practices.

The horse moved forward, head bobbing. "Well," Polijn said, "we're way west of there. Let's head east."

It might, in fact, be interesting to ride all the way back to Rossacotta, just to prance through her old neighborhood. But since the trip would take months, and she was still under ban, Polijn thought a ride to

Anderal's shelter would be excitement enough.

She didn't really expect to move through the gate without a challenge and had a story made up about riding ahead to tell Anderal when the duke set out. But no sentry appeared; either hostilities in the Northern Quilt ceased during the winter or the duke was powerful enough to make sure nobody bothered him. In any case, it saved her some time.

There was a milestone outside the gate, and she climbed up on that to mount her charger. Even with that boost, the broad back proved an illogically difficult perch to achieve. Her final position was precarious, uncomfortable, and very, very high. She had just about decided she'd done it all wrong and would do better to dismount and start over when she heard a cry of "aha!"

Only one person would have said "aha!" instead of "who goes there?," and she'd recognized his voice anyhow. "Go, you halfeaten toad!" she whispered into the little ears. Nodding some more, the horse set off in the direction she had him pointed. Carasta hollered only once more. Polijn wasn't secure enough in her position to look back to see what he was doing.

When she did look around, the only thing she could see

was that she really ought to be moving faster. Somehow the idea of moving faster, even if she could communicate this concept to the horse, had no real appeal for her. So she just studied the little brown ears and hoped the horse would not decide it had done enough for an old compatriot and head back to its nice warm stable.

The horse did keep moving straight ahead as if it knew the road and her destination. That was just as well because the landmarks she had noticed this morning were considerably different in the dark. Even moonrise didn't help. Polijn knew where she was only when she saw the Crossroads Shrine looming ahead.

At the same time she spotted that, she noticed movement off to her right. A figure with arms flailing plowed through the snow. Carasta had taken the clear road to the south, of course, and was now struggling through the band of snow separating the two thoroughfares.

Polijn reached down to slap the horse's side. "Hurry!" If she could get well past the shrine before he reached her, she should be able to stay that far ahead of him the rest of the way. "Hurry, you . . ."

She cast her eyes back toward Carasta as she slapped the horse again and tried to

think of a proper motivational expletive. This was too much to do at once, and she started to slide. She snatched at the loop around her mount's neck, missed, and slid off backward.

The impact as she hit the snow was enough that it took her a second too long to jump up and run after the horse. She had just reached the shrine when Carasta caught her around the waist.

"You'll . . . share!" he panted, shaking her as he spun her around. He was almost completely out of breath, which was the reason, Polijn knew, that she was being shaken and scolded. Carasta was an easy-going soul, not one to make life unpleasant for himself by pursuing retribution in time-consuming ways. A good thump to the head or kick in the stomach were quicker and more satisfying.

He'd get around to those eventually. For now he shook her and sputtered, "Wrong way . . . anyhow. Shelter . . . too small. No reward."

Polijn hung her head as though this regrettable oversight had just occurred to her and hugged his pack, which she had attached to the front of her tunic. Her plan now was to take any reprimand he wished to deal out, perfectly docile, until his guard came down and his

grip loosened. He could chase her, but he could hardly catch her. Though she was stiff from her unaccustomed position, she had most of her running strength left. The one-eyed minstrel was all but worn out.

This plan was canceled, however, when a third hand, a rather rough and heavy hand, grabbed her from behind. Polijn could tell by Carasta's face that he had not been expecting reinforcements. The goblin must have been coming behind her on the eastern road.

"Lookin' for a nice, quiet place, huh?" he demanded. "No need for that. They were all gettin' ready to leave."

This complicated matters all around. Polijn was pretty sure she couldn't outrun Dirklad as well, at least not without the horse, which had continued to stroll east after she dropped off. And Carasta was utterly unprepared for company.

"Why, er, um," said the minstrel, "why, yes, but . . . er, this way you . . . can get started . . . early. And we can . . . rejoin the procession . . . when they get here."

But now the goblin had noticed she wore two packs, one on the back and one in front. "Carrying for both of you, eh?"

Carasta set Polijn on the ground. "Why, um, yes. We, er,

often do this. Kind of a friendly . . . wager, um, on . . ."

Dirklad scratched himself under the nose. "Now, an odder thing I haven't seen all year," he said, "and I saw a crow eat a bottle. My folk, we all carry our own packs because you never know when some sneaky snake might slip out something that don't belong to them. You'd better check."

"Um," said Carasta, not at all willing to open his pack while Dirklad was watching.

But the merchant had unslung his own bundle. "That is yours, isn't it?" he demanded. "Nobody thought about switching with me, eh, and maybe dealing in spices instead of song for a while?" Both eyes studied the minstrels as the hands slid into the pack. He suddenly looked to Polijn much more like the goblins of song and story, who preferred tearing into their foes with their teeth than with any artificial weapons.

"No," grunted Dirklad. "This's mine, right enough. She must've just took yours. Better check. Say!" The goblin lifted a little pot from his pack. "Oil of peppermint! You know what that's good for?"

Polijn knew several uses and started to slide a little to the east. Carasta was moving to

block her when they heard the horn.

Torchlight from the two racing processions fell on three expressions of dismay. Polijn could not regard this arrival as a rescue; it would not do to explain that she was in danger from Carasta because of this ruby horse she had. Carasta, for his part, couldn't complain that Polijn had stolen the horse from him. And Dirklad's plan for the evening had been interrupted. Polijn could see, though, that while Carasta and Dirklad were suffering setbacks, she was in deep trouble. Whatever happened next, she must wind up being carried along to the religious shelter or off to the south.

"I'll have it!" cried the duke, running at the head of the parade.

"Not this year, brother!" exclaimed the other leader, running next to him.

"Look!" shouted their sister. "You're both too late! Somebody's there now!"

And then, of course, Polijn knew what to say. "Behold the Kings of the Crossroads!" she exclaimed, striding forward so she could wave a hand back at the minstrel and the merchant. "How fortunate that Lord Carasta, an adept in the worship of Our Lord Horse, should be one of them!"

"You were here first!" protested Carasta, over the cries of the crowd.

Polijn spread a hand on her chest, appalled. "A woman be King of the Crossroads?" she demanded.

"Why not?" roared Chilia. The duke gave his sister a shove.

"Not that again," he ordered. "We've never had a Queen of the Crossroads yet. Well, Miskey, bring the two crowns. I don't say they beat us fair and square, but they did beat us. And, Miskey, find out who was supposed to be guarding the gate."

"Now, wait," Dirklad began.

"You'll have the twin stipends paid to you in the morning, on our way back," the duke informed him.

The goblin slapped Carasta on the back. "Why, then, my lord, we wouldn't think of insulting you by refusing the honor." He leaned toward the minstrel to whisper, "Time enough tomorrow to show the little pillow how peppermint's used."

Polijn cleared her throat. "I'll just hurry on and explain things to Abbot Anderal."

"Tell him we'll be there—both of us—as soon as this ceremony's over," said the duke, with a glower at his brother.

Polijn bounded off into the snow. She found the horse some forty yards along, mainly by running smack into him. He'd been standing in the shadow of a bare tree. The big eyes turned toward her seemed somewhat amused.

There were no milestones handy, nor any other trees for yards, so Polijn got a grip and climbed this one. A reasonably solid branch hung out over the horse, enabling her to lower herself gingerly into her previous place. After calling the horse a few names, only partly so as to get it moving again, she rode on to the shelter.

Anderal, looking fresh from an afternoon's nap, stood outside the door with all the fellows of the establishment. They raised their torches and cheered at the sight of her.

"All praise!" cried Anderal, even though they were already praising to the fullness of their lungs. "The lad's returned!"

"We should have had faith, as you said!" agreed one of his subordinates.

They did not, at least, seem to regard her as a criminal, unless they were cheering that now they had someone to sacrifice on the altar. Polijn reached into Carasta's pack, but then thought better of it. Producing the idol only to break it as she

dismounted would do her no good.

A dozen hands were raised to help her dismount, and she was glad of the help. Once she stood, a little awkwardly, on the ground again, she said, "I have brought . . ."

But Anderal had one hand on her shoulder and another on the horse's makeshift halter. "This way, lad," he said. "Time enough for the story once we're inside."

Instead of leading them into the shelter, though, he took Polijn and the horse around behind the building. Not knowing quite what was up, Polijn felt it was time to show what she'd done. Spilling Carasta's trinkets right and left, she brought up the heavy red statue.

"Sir," she said, as they stopped before a large wooden door, "I have brought Our Lord Horse."

The abbot glanced down. "Oh, that. Just hold it a while, would you, lad?" He swung the big door wide.

Behind it lay a large, well-appointed stable, brightly lit. He led the Rossacottan warhorse to the single stall. Polijn followed, envying him his ease. But the way he led the horse told her he'd done this before.

"You must've misheard, lad," Anderal said, dropping the makeshift halter. "This is not

the shelter of Our Lord Horse, but of Our Lord's Horse. It's an easy mistake to make. Here we stable a horse for the Almighty, should He take it into His head to leave Heaven and return to Atfalas."

"Ah!" said Polijn, hefting the statue as she turned to look around the big room.

"What you hold there is no more than an amulet," he went on. "It is exposed to view only when Our Lord's Horse has died. Each time it has been exposed, a new horse has arrived to take the place of the old."

Polijn nodded and relinquished the statue as Anderal held out his hands. "It is an honor, of course," she said, "to have brought you Our Lord's Horse. But now I'd better go. Without Our Lord's Horse, I'll have to walk, and there's need of speed. It is the duke's horse, and I'd best be gone before he . . ."

"We—" the abbot coughed to draw her attention, which was on the open stable door—"have a private room, lad, for those who bring us Our Lord's Horse."

Polijn looked at him and raised one eyebrow. The abbot went on. "It sometimes takes a while for the former owner to become accustomed to the

honor. Horses have come to us by irregular means in the past. It is not our business to question that part of it, but it is also a matter of service to be sure that no harm comes to those who have had the glory of bringing us Our Lord's Horse."

Polijn understood. She had only to wait in this secret room until the duke had come and gone. Dirklad and Carasta would be spending the whole night at the crossroads, as befitted their new royal status, and surely they would be taken back to the duke's for more celebration at dawn. Even the goblin would have to rest after all this, which meant that if she set out at first light, she could get at least a day's head start.

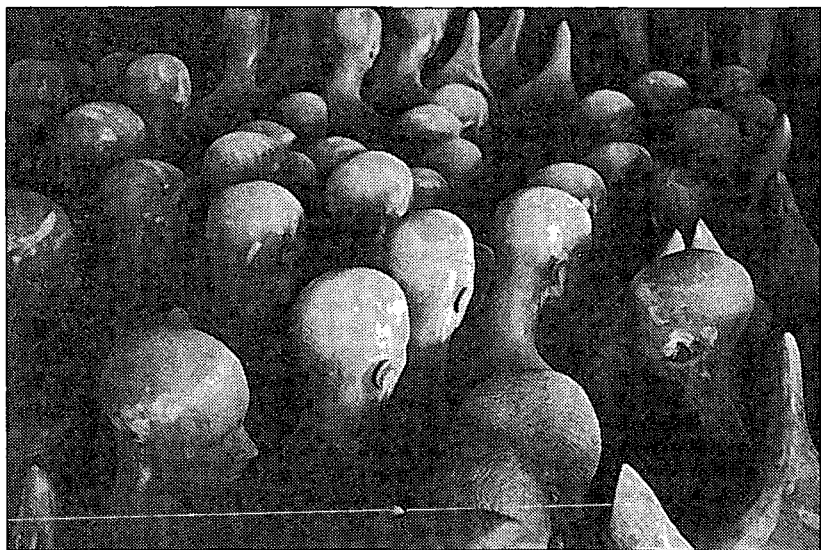
She looked up at Anderal. "The procession is not far behind me," she said. "If you could . . . ouch!"

She rubbed the spot where the horse had nipped her. Anderal chuckled. "No doubt that passes for civility where he comes from. He's Rossacottan, you see."

"No doubt," said Polijn. She returned this show of affection in Rossacottan hand signals the abbot fortunately did not understand, and then followed Anderal out of the stable.



# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Erich Hartmann/© Magnum Photos*

Pushing ahead. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "Mid-December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

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The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 285.

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# Why the Breadman Died

by Clyde Haywood

**M**aybe the killer thought that by the time the bread truck went off the road through a guard rail, flipped over a few times to land on its back at the foot of the mountain, and burned, nobody would notice that the driver had a hole in him the size of a .30-.30 bullet. But the truck didn't burn. Maybe it would have worked that way anyway if somebody less observant or less conscientious had been the first officer on the scene. But Bud Davis got there first, and Bud faithfully accompanied the body down to the little morgue at Gibson County Hospital. There he stayed and watched while Doc Killian started working on it. It was Bud, not Doc, who first saw the oval hole in the breadman's forehead when Doc washed the poor guy's shattered face. Then Bud and Doc took Doc's camera and magnifying glass and some surgical probes and worked out a trajectory establishing that the bullet had come from far above.

Doc tracked the wound down through the breadman's brain,

then his neck, then on down into his torso, where he finally pulled out of a rib a chunk of lead not nearly as mangled as Bud had been afraid it might be. Bud sent the lead down to the state ballistics lab in Raleigh by code three courier. Next, even before he talked to the sheriff, he phoned Roger Dale Fornby to tell him what had happened. Roger Dale had just walked into his office when the call came in. As soon as Bud hung up, Roger Dale called the FBI's state headquarters down in Charlotte and asked for Jack Maloney.

"Hey, bossman," Fornby greeted his long-suffering supervisor. "The new chief deputy sheriff in Gibson County just rang up and said there's been a murder up in the west end of the county."

"I take it you think this has something to do with you and me," Maloney answered.

"Well, yeah," Fornby drawled. "You know how murders are. If we don't solve it right away, it might be weeks and weeks before we get it sorted out. So I thought I'd get

right over there and help them. If you need me, you could get me through the sheriff's office and their radios and all."

"Roger Dale," Maloney told him, "just because an FBI agent has been in a resident agency in a small town for several years, that doesn't make him part of the local police. The sheriff is the chief law enforcement officer in Gibson County, not you."

"I know, bossman," Roger Dale said, "but with the sheriff and the chief deputy both being brand new, they're going to need some assistance."

"If I remember correctly," his supervisor said, "that 'new' chief deputy was a regular deputy for three years, and a criminal investigator in the army before that. And didn't you just last year talk me into getting him one of those local law enforcement courses at the Bureau Academy?"

"Yeah, I did. But, see, this would give us a real good chance to see how well they trained him. And that new sheriff is as green as a weed."

Maloney resolved to be firm with Fornby this time. "Roger. You spend way too much time on local law enforcement assistance. There is plenty of federal crime for two resident agents, and you're the only one assigned there right now. Unless

this murder happened on federal land or we've got some other kind of federal jurisdiction, it's the sheriff's case, not yours."

Roger Dale sighed. "Then I guess we're out of luck, bossman. Davis says this victim was shot from high above out on Blacksnake Road. There ain't nothing uphill from that road but the Blue Ridge Parkway and some other National Park land that goes with it. With UNSUB shooting from federal land, it looks like we've got federal jurisdiction."

Maloney fell quiet for several seconds the way he always did while he accepted the fact that Roger Dale was going to do anyway whatever his supervisor didn't want him to. "We'll open a file on it," he said at last. "You'll keep us posted on what you're doing?"

"I'll do her," Roger agreed.

"Good luck," the supervisor signed off.

Fornby hurried to the sheriff's office. On the way he rehearsed several versions of what he would say when he saw the sheriff. That is, he planned how he would offer his help without sounding like the S.O.B. from the FBI who thinks he knows more than the locals, even though he knew that's exactly what he was.

"Sheriff Taylor," he began as he hustled into the office where the sheriff and Davis were talking, "I just heard what happened. If the killer was on park land and the victim wasn't, then both of us could have jurisdiction. I thought maybe it would be more efficient if we both worked on one investigation instead of falling all over each other."

The sheriff nodded. "And besides, Bud called and asked you to run things because both of you figure you've been investigating crime in this county for years and I'm just a politician who happened to be in the right place with the right pull when this office came up vacant in the middle of a term. And anyway, neither one of you men really believes a woman can handle this job, but you think I'll take bossing better from you than from my own deputy."

Since Davis worked for her, he was in no position to say much of anything. Fornby thought of a couple of good responses but decided after an embarrassed pause that the truth would probably do better.

"Well, I guess that's pretty much the facts except for that part about a woman not being able to do the job. What do you say? Can we work it together?" he asked.

The sheriff responded as calmly as before. "Yes, we can." She placed a decided emphasis on the "we."

"I mean," she went on, "we can all investigate it together. I suspect that you were about to suggest that I stay here and pretend to supervise while you and Bud go out and really investigate. I promised the county commissioners when I bullied them into making me interim sheriff that I would learn the criminal side of the job. I mean to do just that. When I've learned how it's done in the field, that will be the time to start supervising. For now, my secretary can cover the phone. You fellows are going to teach me how to investigate."

Roger Dale had suspected that a woman who both could and would become the first female sheriff in the state was not somebody you'd want to mess around with. Now he knew for sure. She might not look much like a mountain county sheriff. All the others Fornby'd ever known were hamfisted, deep-chested good-ol'-boys so alike that they might have been produced by a cookie cutter. Louise Taylor looked more like a dignified, middle-aged English teacher. But Fornby had learned as a teen not to underestimate

teachers like that, and he was not about to underestimate Louise Taylor. He agreed that the joint investigation would be on her terms.

Ten minutes later the two of them were settled into the back seat of her big, black official Ford with Davis driving them out to the scene of the murder like some kind of chauffeur.

"Know anything about the dead man yet?" Roger asked the chief deputy.

"Name's Gregory Haynes," Davis replied. "Driver's license shows age thirty-six. Pictures of a wife and a couple of kids in his wallet. I called over to the bakery he was driving for in Sulphur Springs, Tennessee, and talked to the manager. He'd already been notified by one of the state troopers. He had to tell the family. I didn't envy him none."

"Did he know Haynes personally?" Fornby asked.

"Yeah. It ain't a real big outfit. Everybody knows everybody."

"Did he know any reason why anybody would want to kill him?"

"No. Said he was a heck of a nice guy. Hard worker, family man, deacon in his church, went to P.T.A., stuff like that. He said the warehouse foreman knew him better than he did, but he had sent the foreman

out to make the dead man's deliveries. Sounds kind of hard, don't it? But life has to go on, I guess. Anyway, I figured we would catch the foreman in later, or else try to run him down over here on the route."

Roger turned to the sheriff. "Not to be elementary, but right obviously if we could find out why somebody would want the breadman killed, we'd be a long way toward finding out who UNSUB is."

Sheriff Taylor looked puzzled. "UNSUB?"

"Yeah," Roger explained. "That's who killed the breadman. UNSUB. Stands for unknown subject in FBI language. That's your first lesson."

As they talked, Davis piloted the big Ford along a narrow strip of asphalt that deserved its name of Blacksnake Road. For a few miles it twisted and coiled its way in and out along the face of Blue Rock Mountain. Then it ran straight out the side of a promontory of granite, and snapped back like a whip cracking. Davis slowed almost to a stop at the point of that hairpin turn. He pulled just far enough past the curve to be safe if somebody else came along, threw a portable blue light up on the dash, turned it on along with the car's flashers, and stepped out. He led the

other two back to the point of the turn.

"That's where Haynes went off," he told them.

The three looked straight down the face of the mountain. Far below they could see the mangled remains of the bread truck.

"Anybody done a search on the truck?" Roger Dale asked.

"Seth and Billy went over it. Didn't find anything."

"What exactly would they be looking for?" the sheriff asked.

"Whatever they could find," Fornby told her. "Most of the time you don't find nothing. But if you don't look, you never will find nothing."

After the fatal curve, the mountain's face swung inward in a concave arc, then back out farther than the promontory. So the road turned back on itself across a narrow gorge. Davis pointed up the opposite face.

"Reckon the shot had to come from way up over there. You can see there ain't nothing but rock for a good ways. He had to be up there on the park land where the laurel grows. Otherwise, even if he could have hung onto that rock and got a shot off, anybody could have seen him. It was beginning to get good light before he done the killing."

"Pretty hard shot," Fornby said.

Davis nodded. "I could have made it, though. You could, too. A lot of the deer hunters in the county could have."

"It was a moving target," Roger noted.

Davis shook his head. "Not moving hardly at all. Way that bullet went in he got him straight on as he was making the curve. It's so sharp the bread truck would have to be hinged in the middle to make it around faster than five miles an hour."

"It was going fast enough to crack the guard rail."

Davis shook his head again. "Didn't take that much speed. It was a heavy vehicle, and it set up high. Look how that old wood guard rail broke down instead of busting out. The truck just kind of fell over it. It wasn't going very fast at all."

Roger finally agreed. "We narrow the suspects down to good shots, then, but not to just the very best. Plus which, he had to get out through that laurel from somewhere a good ways back. He couldn't just step on the parkway and come straight down at it. I reckon we can eliminate the aged and infirm."

Sheriff Taylor looked skeptical. "Now that we know it was a good shot and someone at least

reasonably healthy and agile, what good does that do us? We can't very well make a list of everybody in the county who meets that description, even if we had some way of knowing that it was somebody from this county."

Roger explained. "If we find somebody that's a suspect that don't meet that description, we'll either have to eliminate them or look for an accomplice."

As they climbed back into the car, Bud looked back at Roger. "Want to try to get out there and search the laurel?" he asked.

"Yeah," Roger replied. "But we'll have to drive all the way over past Scroggs Cove to hit the parkway, and then come back across it to where we can find a path down."

Bud had another thought. "On the way," he said, "we might as well swing over by Amon Scroggs's store. That was supposed to have been the breadman's first stop."

"Let's see if ol' Amon can tell us anything," Roger agreed.

A few minutes later they pulled up in front of an ancient brown wood and shingle building with two gas pumps out front and a large red-lettered sign identifying Scroggs Cove Grocery.

As they entered the little country store, a bald man in a cane-bottomed chair behind the counter rose. "Morning, Bud, Roger," he said. He turned abruptly and busied himself with the canned goods on the shelf behind him, taking down each can, dusting it, and putting it back.

"Morning, Amon," the deputy responded. "You know Sheriff Taylor?"

Amon glanced around. "Morning, Missus Taylor," he said before he turned back to his busywork.

Fornby walked to a cold drink box at the back of the store and took out three sodas. Returning to the register, he laid a bill on the counter. This forced Scroggs to turn and face him.

"Reckon you heard about the breadman," the agent said.

Scroggs nodded. "I heard."

"Know him?" Fornby asked.

"I got bread from that bakery every Tuesday and Friday." Amon replied.

"So you knew Gregory Haynes?"

"Yeah, I knew him."

"How long?" Fornby asked.

The storekeeper shrugged. "Ten years. Twelve maybe."

"Know any reason why anybody would want to kill him?"

"No." The storekeeper snapped out the word and turned back to his shelves.



Davis picked up three packs of cheese crackers and threw them on the counter to turn the storekeeper from his cans again. But he got no more out of Scroggs than Fornby had. The three law officers went back out to the car.

"He knows something," Roger said as they got in.

Davis nodded agreement.

"Why would he be lying, do you think?" the sheriff asked.

"He's not lying, exactly," Roger told her. "You have to understand hillbillies."

"Roger Dale, I grew up in this county," she reminded him. "You didn't."

"I know that," Roger said. "But you grew up in town, as Judge Roland's daughter. And you went all the way through high school and off to college with the other honor students. And you go to First Presbyterian in town instead of one of them little deep water, shouting churches back in the cove. Even politicking, the only ones of the cove people you meet are them that might make it to a meeting at the schoolhouse, and they ain't the typical ones."

She interrupted him. "This sounds like a long lesson. I'm sure I've got a lot to learn, but right now tell me the part that has to do with Amon Scroggs."

"I didn't mean to lecture," Roger told her.

"You did too. Now tell me about Amon."

"The people that live way back in one of these coves are clannish in the oldest way. They're all kin to one another, and they don't trust outsiders, even from two, three miles outside the cove, let alone all the way down in town. The most important thing in the world to one of them is to not let down another one. They won't tell on each other any more than young'uns will when the teacher's trying to find out who wrote a dirty word on the blackboard. But to the best of them—and Amon's one of the best—the next most important thing is their word."

"Yeah," Bud put in. "When I go to arrest one of them, if he'll promise to meet me in town the next morning I don't go to the trouble of taking him in."

Roger went on. "So when a fellow like the storekeeper who's generally friendly and talkative enough don't want to talk to us about something as interesting as a murder in his own neighborhood, it's because he feels like he can't. He don't want to lie to us, and again he don't want to tell us the truth. That means he knows something, and it has to do with some of his people—some of these Scroggs Cove folks."

The whole time they were talking they remained parked in front of Amon's store. Davis hadn't even started the engine.

"By us sitting out here like this, won't he realize we're suspicious of him?" the sheriff asked.

Both men winked and nodded. "That's the idea," Fornby said. "Let him sweat a little more. But I guess we'd better get on with it."

As procedure required, Davis radioed in to the office as he started the engine. Sheriff Taylor's secretary responded to his call.

"Bud, I mean G.S. Two, the lab called from Raleigh. That lead you sent down was from a .30-.30 just like you thought it was."

"Thanks. Anything else important going on?" he asked.

"Yes. One more thing I think you'd want to know. You remember Jubal Scroggs from up there in the Cove? He called in and said somebody broke into his house last night and stole his best rifle. He said it was a .30-.30. I started to dispatch Seth or Billy, but with it being the same kind of gun that was used in the murder, and y'all being out that way already, I thought maybe you'd want to cover it yourself."

"That cannot be a coincidence. You done good, Betty,"

Davis told her. "We're on our way. Sheriff, let's put a badge on that girl and get another secretary."

The radio crackled again. "Y'all know how to get there?" Betty asked.

"I think so, but give us directions anyway," Bud said as he pulled out of the store lot and turned up Scroggs Cove Road.

"Which way do you figure it?" Bud asked Fornby as they rode.

"Too early to say," Fornby answered.

"What do you mean, 'which way'?" the sheriff asked.

"Well, it's got to be one of two ways," Roger told her. "Maybe somebody did steal ol' Jubal's gun and kill the breadman with it. Or maybe Jubal killed the breadman. He's a deer hunter. He could get out to the laurel patch, and he could make that shot. He might have thought that everybody would miss that one bullet hole in a burned up body and call it an accident. Once he heard, maybe from Amon, that we know it's murder, he got scared. Even up in Scroggs Cove folks know we can match up a bullet to a gun that fired it. So he got rid of the murder weapon. Then, to turn suspicion away from him, he reported the gun stolen."

"Wouldn't that be sort of stupid?" Sheriff Taylor asked. "I

mean, as many good shots as there are in this county, we might never get around to him if he didn't call attention to himself with that theft report."

"Right," Roger answered. "It would be kind of stupid. One of the reasons we catch most murderers is because we're smarter than they are. And for me and ol' Bud to be smarter than them, some of them have to be pretty stupid. Hey, Bud, ain't we supposed to turn left up there?"

"Yeah. Just past that sign," Bud answered.

The sign, which stood in front of a neat little crackerbox of a house, read FLO AND DOLLY'S BEAUTY SHOP.

"I didn't know there was a beauty shop all the way up in here," Roger commented. "It's been a couple of years since I've been this far back in the Cove."

"That's about when they opened it," Bud told him as they swung off the asphalt onto a sharply rising gravel lane. "Two sisters, Dolly and Flo Wilson. I think they do pretty good. There ain't another beauty shop between here and town."

Just then they passed a sign informing them that they were on a PRIVATE ROAD. A few yards farther a second ordered them to KEEP OUT. A third, a hundred yards past the second, an-

nounced that TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

"Either he's awfully possessive or he values his privacy more than most folks," observed the sheriff.

"His ancestors fought for this land," Roger told her.

"From the looks of it, they must have been hotheads," said Bud, glancing around at the thin, rocky soil. He drove past an old gray barn and pulled in view of a white frame house almost at the top of the ridge. "You know, he's Enos Scroggs's son. Enos killed a man over a dollar."

"Why did he kill a man over a dollar?" Sheriff Taylor asked.

"Your daddy asked him that in court. He said, 'Enos, why would you kill a man over a dollar?' And Enos just looked at him and said, 'It was my dollar.' It was before my time, but they tell it for the truth."

Bud stopped the car in front of the house. As they got out, they heard dogs barking wildly from behind it.

Bud pointed to a sign warning, BITING DOGS.

"Reckon he put them dogs up, knowing we was coming," he opined.

"Or maybe he just turns them loose when he wants 'em to bite somebody," Roger said.

As they started up a long flight of wooden steps to the

front porch, a tall, lean man stepped out the door.

"Come around to the back," he ordered curtly. "That's where they got in."

With that, he turned and stomped through the house, leaving them to walk around the outside. The house was set into the side of a steep hill, so that it was over two stories high in the front, but barely one in the rear. As they came up to the back corner of the building, the man they had seen in the front beckoned to them from just inside a solid wooden door.

Again he offered no greeting, just called out, "Over here." He pointed to two neat screw holes in the wood of the door frame. "Looks like they took a screw-driver or something and popped the hasp right off her."

"You don't have a latch and knob on the door," Bud noted.

The man shook his head. "Not the back door. It don't go right into the house. It's a kind of a storage room, and my paw just put a hasp and a padlock on it when he built the place. We used to lock the door between it and the rest of the house, but I reckon I got out of the habit. Come in, and I'll show you what they done in there."

He opened the door wider and threw his arm back like an

usher. As they passed in, Bud tried awkwardly to supply the introduction that still hadn't taken place.

"Jubal, you know Roger Dale, I reckon, and this here's Sheriff Taylor."

Jubal grunted acknowledgment, then pushed around them to lead the way out of the storage room and into the main house.

"Come on over through here into the living room. That's where my gun case is at," he told them.

Roger Dale tried to slow him down. "Hold on a minute, Jubal. Let's look around in here and see if they damaged anything else."

"No," Scroggs insisted. "I done looked, and they ain't nothing. Now, come on in here."

Roger Dale shrugged and followed. "There it is," Scroggs said, pointing to a handsome glass-fronted gun cabinet built into a wall. One of its doors stood open. The other lay on the floor, squarely in front of the cabinet.

The cabinet had racks for six long guns. Two shotguns, a .22 rifle, a reproduction of a muzzle loader, and an over-and-under stood in five of them. Scroggs rested his hand on the empty rack.

"This is where it stood," he announced. "My best rifle. Only had it three years, and I bought it new. They tore my gun rack up, too. Built it myself."

"How'd they do it?" Roger asked as he bent to examine the apparently undamaged door.

"Well, I had it locked. But when I built it, I put them good piano hinges on it. They must have took their screwdriver or whatever and popped the pin out of that one. It'll be a sight of trouble to get another one."

"Where were you at when they done it?" Roger Dale asked him.

"Me and them dogs was out running coons from sundown to about six this morning. They could have done it anytime."

"It ain't coon season," Fornby told him.

"No, but it will be," Scroggs said. "And them dogs needed work."

Roger thought a minute. "You was out running dogs all night on a Thursday. Didn't you have to work today?" he asked.

"No. I got some time coming at the foundry, and I was going to take today off. I was going to sleep a little and farm a little. Now I'm going to have to work on fixing them doors. Anyway, it don't matter none about that. What are y'all gonna do about

whoever busted into my house and stole my rifle?"

"The more information we've got, the better chance we'll have of catching them," Roger Dale told him. He looked around the living room. On an end table not far from the gun rack stood a framed eight by ten of Scroggs with a very attractive blonde woman and a small boy. Across the room on the interior wall hung a montage of the same woman and the boy, the child aging from infancy to about four years of age across the range of the photos.

Fornby gestured at the eight by ten. "Where was your wife when they came in?"

Scroggs bridled. "You leave my wife out of this."

"Jubal, we've got to find out if she saw anything," Roger told him calmly.

Scroggs's lips tightened. "She left me a week ago. Took my boy. One of my cars, too."

"Where's she staying at now?" Roger asked him.

"Ain't none of your concern," Scroggs snapped. "She wasn't here, so she couldn't have seen nothing."

"We might want to talk to her just in case she can think of somebody that might have done it. It pretty much had to be somebody that had been here."

"What do you mean?" Scroggs asked.

"Well, looky here," Roger said, gesturing at the remaining guns. "He didn't just break in here to rummage around. He left five *pretty* good guns and just took the one *real* good one. He knew what he was looking for, and he come in here and got it."

"That don't mean he'd been here," Scroggs said. "He could have just been somebody that knowed guns. He broke in here and seen a real good one, and he took it."

"Jubal," Roger retorted, "that don't make sense. Somebody that knew guns didn't just happen to come all the way up the Cove, find you and your dogs gone, and happen to see a Smith and Wesson .30-.30 and steal it. It had to be somebody that knew what you had and come up here after it."

"Well, it couldn't have been nobody that had been here," Jubal insisted. "There hasn't been nobody here but me and my family for a year or so. And there wouldn't be none of them do that to me."

"That being the case," Fornby said, "it had to be somebody that knew you had that gun from somewheres else. Where all had you had it at?"

"Nowhere. Not since deer season last year. It ain't deer season this year."

"No. But like you said about coon season, it's fixing to be," Roger said. "Ain't you been taking target practice and trueing in your rifle?"

"Not off the place," Jubal answered.

"Yeah, I guess you've got plenty of room right here," Roger agreed. "I reckon you stand out there in front and set your targets down toward the springhead. With them big oak trees and that little hill behind it, you'd know where your round was going and not have to worry about killing one of your cows or something."

"What if I do?" Jubal snapped. "How does that catch whoever it was that stole my gun?"

Bud walked over and patted him on the shoulder. "Ol' Roger Dale's just trying to get the facts. If you'll tell him all you can, it'll help us get started."

That seemed to satisfy him. "Okay. That's where I shoot."

Roger Dale slid a small notebook out of his jacket pocket and wrote in it for several seconds. Then he looked up at Jubal again. "So you can't think of anybody who could have seen you with that gun lately?"

Jubal shook his head.

"That's all the more reason we need to talk to your wife. Where'd you say she's staying at?" Roger asked.

"I didn't," Jubal grunted. "She called, but she never said where she's at. Maybe her sister's, Mabel Wade, over beyond Gibsontown."

After a few more unproductive questions, Bud got a camera out of the car and took pictures of everything. Then the officers went out, assuring Jubal that they would try to recover his rifle.

When they were back in the car, the sheriff spoke first. "I suppose we sit here and talk a while so he'll begin to wonder if we're suspicious of him."

"You learn fast," said Fornby.

"Looks like he done it, all right," Bud observed.

"Either that or we've got the most considerate and careful burglar that ever turned on a flashlight," said Roger. "Lucky, too. Hits a house a mile and a half from anywhere on the only night in recent memory when there ain't nobody home all night. Then he steals one gun with the least possible trouble for himself. And the gun just happens to be the same caliber that killed the breadman."

"I think we know one more thing," the sheriff put in. "He really is as stupid as we talked about. He couldn't have faked a less likely burglary if he had tried."

Bud nodded. "He ain't got it in him to break anything that's his. And if he reported the rest of his guns stolen he'd be without guns. He'd never be able to explain it when he used them again."

"Maybe so," Roger said, "but while we're sitting here talking about how stupid he is, we still don't have the first piece of evidence that he committed a murder that we know he's guilty of. No motive. No weapon. No nothing."

"Where you think he got rid of that rifle?" Bud asked.

"I was going to ask you that," Roger said. "You know I've always said that if you want to find where somebody hid something, you've got to think like he does. You know him best, Bud. Where would you get rid of it if you were him?"

Bud thought a moment. "He's worked down at the foundry for years and years. He's likely got a key. The breadman got it about six. He might have had time to go down there and destroy that gun before anybody came into work. Or, he hunts all down through Fish Hook Lake, and there's all them bottomless pits and pools down through there. He might have had time to pitch it in one of them. Either way, we'll never find it."



"Maybe, maybe not," said Roger. "Anyway, even if we knew he had it in his bedroom, we ain't got enough evidence to make probable cause for a search warrant. Let's go get on with it. We need to search that laurel patch and do a bunch of other stuff."

Bud started the car. When they had passed the barn and were out of sight of the house, but not yet to the road, the sheriff spoke.

"Stop a minute and flip open the trunk," she told Davis.

Bud turned off the engine and pushed a yellow button in the glove compartment. As the trunk lid opened, the sheriff got out of the car.

"Don't look around," she ordered.

"Why not?" Roger Dale asked.

"I'm going to change clothes," she answered. He studied her a moment. She was wearing the same uniform silver-tan slacks and military shirt that her deputies wore, unlike her male predecessors, who had always worn dark business suits to distinguish them from the rest of the department.

"What are you fixing to change about them?" he asked.

"I keep some civilian clothes in a garment bag in the trunk,

just in case I need them during the business day."

Roger Dale nodded. "I do the same thing with a fishing pole in the bureau car," he said.

"Now, don't look around," she told them again.

"Wait a minute," Roger said. "You can order your deputy not to look, but you have to ask me."

"Don't look around, please," she amended.

"Yes, ma'am," Roger said.

A few minutes later she stepped back into the car wearing a simple blue dress and carrying a pair of pumps and a purse. As she slipped off her black uniform shoes and slid her feet into the pumps, Roger Dale commented:

"That's the kind of outfit my wife would say you could wear about anywhere."

She nodded. "I never know where I'll need to wear it."

"One of the few places you wouldn't want to wear it is out to that laurel patch on the face of Blue Rock Mountain."

"I'm not going there," she said. "You and Bud may be, but I'm not."

She took a comb out of her purse and began to frizz out her crisp hair. "I'm going to stop at Flo and Dolly's and ask them to work me in for a trim."

"You're what?" Bud exploded.

"Jubal's wife fits into this mystery somewhere or other," Sheriff Taylor said, "and I'm going to find out more information about her at the beauty shop than we could anywhere else in this county. In every picture he has of her, she looks like she's just had her hair done—done well, too. I bet she's in there every week. Even if she isn't, they'll have other customers who talk about her. You guys go climb the mountain. I'm going to get my hair done."

As Bud drove down the hill, Roger spoke. "I ain't sure we ought to go up on that mountain, either. We can radio Seth and Billy to do that ground search. Me and ol' Bud might do more good to run over into Tennessee and see what we can find out about why some fellow would want to kill Gregory Haynes."

"Either way," the sheriff told him, "leave me at the beauty shop for a couple of hours. Whether they can work me in or not, I can be talking and listening to them and their customers."

As Bud pulled up in front of the shop to let her out among several parked cars, he asked, "Why did you bother changing clothes? Everybody in this county knows you're the sheriff in or out of uniform."

"They'll know it when I go in," she said. "But if they don't have the uniform to remind them, by the time I'm in the chair I'll be just one more gray-haired lady in a blue dress. And everybody will be relaxed and talking."

"I believe we've just had a couple of lessons from her," Roger told Bud.

"I don't much believe they'll be the last ones," Bud said.

Sheriff Taylor stepped out of the car and started toward the shop. Then she turned and called back to Fornby, "Oh, and thanks, Roger Dale."

"What for?" he asked.

"For not looking around when I was changing clothes," she answered.

"You're welcome," he responded. "And thank you, too, Louise."

It was her turn to ask what for.

"For not remembering how many mirrors there are on this police car," he called through the open window as Bud pulled back onto the asphalt and headed toward Tennessee.

A little more than two hours later, Bud and Roger drove back to Flo and Dolly's. It was nearly dark, and most of the other cars were gone. Louise Taylor came almost running

out as soon as they pulled up. Her bright blue eyes were dancing, and her lips were fighting against a smile.

"You look like the cat that didn't only just eat the canary but knows where there's another one with a busted wing," Roger told her as she hopped in. "We done all right over in Tennessee, too. You tell us yours, and then we'll tell you ours on the way back to see Amon at the store."

"You suppose Amon will still be there?" she asked. "That would be a long day if he opened this morning."

"He's there about sixteen hours a day," Bud said. "Six, sometimes seven days a week. He'll be there."

Sheriff Taylor began to spill her news. "Donna Scroggs is a regular customer, as I guessed. She's been in every Thursday for the last two years except yesterday. Says she wants to look her best on Friday. Sometimes she borrowed their phone and made long distance calls. She always got the time and charges and paid them for it. The number that showed up on their bill was in Tennessee. They had a recent bill, and I called it. It was the East Tennessee Bakery. Wasn't that who Greg Haynes drove for?"

"Yeah, it was," Bud said. "It sure was. And Amon said they

delivered on Tuesday and Friday."

The sheriff went on. "The only problem is, they heard her call a name a few times, and it wasn't Greg, or Gregory."

"Was it Frank?" Roger asked.

"Yes!" she cried out. "What have you found out?"

"Louise, did I tell you your hair looks good?" he teased.

"Roger, now!" she almost shouted.

"Here we are at Amon's store," he grinned as Bud turned off the road.

A customer was leaving, but Amon was otherwise alone. Fornby turned the OPEN sign around so that it told the world that the store was CLOSED.

When Amon saw that the officers were back, he sank into his chair. He did not look any of them in the eye. He did not speak.

"Amon," Fornby said, "we need to ask you some more questions."

Still he said nothing.

"This morning you said the bread company delivered Tuesday and Friday, right?"

Amon nodded.

"But Greg Haynes didn't come Tuesday and Friday, did he?"

Roger Dale got out his notepad.

"I need you to speak up so I can write it down," he told Amon. "Was that a 'no'?"

"That's right," Amon mumbled.

"Haynes just came on Tuesday, right?"

Amon nodded.

"Speak up," Roger Dale told him.

"Yeah," Amon said. "Just Tuesday."

"Another fellow come on Friday, didn't he, Amon?" Fornby asked.

"Yeah," Amon answered.

"Was his name Frank Britt?"

Amon nodded, then mumbled. "Yes, Frank Britt."

"This morning," Fornby continued, "you said you didn't know any reason why anybody would want to kill that breadman. That was Greg Haynes. You do know a reason why somebody would want to kill Frank Britt, don't you?"

Amon stared at the floor.

"Maybe," he said at last.

"You got to do better than that," Fornby told him. "Do you know a reason or don't you?"

"Yeah, I do," Amon almost whispered.

Roger Dale wrote on his pad. "Who had reason to kill Britt?" he asked.

Amon didn't answer.

"Who was it?" Roger Dale asked again.

Still Amon did not answer.

"Was it Jubal Scroggs?"

When Amon still didn't answer, Fornby stood silent, just letting the question hang in the air. Amon stared at the floor. At last he stole a glance at Roger Dale. The agent was staring down at him. Still silent.

Finally Amon nodded. "Yeah." Again he almost whispered.

"Yeah what?" • Fornby pressed.

"Yeah, Roger Dale, it was Jubal."

Fornby wrote it down. "Britt was seeing Donna Scroggs, wasn't he?"

Amon stared at the floor.

"Tell me out loud," Roger demanded.

"Yeah, Roger Dale, he was seeing Donna."

Fornby wrote it down. "Did he see her on Friday mornings while Jubal was at work, when Frank came over here to make deliveries?"

"Yeah, Roger Dale, that's when he seen her."

Roger wrote it down. "And I reckon he first met her when he was making deliveries—maybe right here at your store."

Amon nodded. Then at last he began to tell the story. As Roger had planned, once the first few truths had been forced out, the rest poured out like olives from a bottle.

"He met her right here," Amon began. "Maybe two years ago, maybe longer. She used to always shop early on Friday mornings. Jubal had to go in to work early on Fridays. Since she was awake anyway, and since I open at seven, she used to be my first customer, every Friday. Frank would come in to make his delivery, and he'd see her every week. At first he used to just kid her about being the early bird, and did she want to buy some worms.

"Then they got to talking about one thing and another. Then he started carrying her groceries out to the car. Wasn't too long till he was driving out of here heading up into the Cove a few minutes after she'd left, instead of toward town where his next delivery was. Then a couple of hours later I'd see his truck go by again, heading into town."

Roger wrote it all down.

"'Course, people got to talking after awhile," Amon went on. "They would see that bread truck parked here and there up in the Cove. I never heard of anybody actually seeing her pick him up, but everybody knew she was. Jubal had to hear of it after awhile. Yeah, Jubal had reason to kill him."

Roger wrote it all down. When there wasn't any more, he and the two county officers

finally walked out to the car and sat down.

"Just to put it all together," Fornby told the sheriff, "over in Tennessee we talked to the warehouse manager. He told us, of course, that Britt was the regular Friday man, not Haynes. Haynes always had Fridays off. Then yesterday Britt all of a sudden asked for today off. Haynes said he'd drive for him. Company didn't care. They pay by miles and sales, not hours. So it didn't cost them overtime or nothing.

"So then we started asking him about Britt. Britt wasn't like Haynes. Haynes was a straight arrow, and as regular as a clock ticking. They knew within minutes when Haynes would hit every store on his route. Britt was less dependable. They liked him okay, but he was less dependable.

"About two years ago, everybody on Britt's Friday route except Amon started calling, wanting to know where he was at. He'd started running two or three hours late. Then they just got to looking for him later and quit calling. Storekeepers didn't care much as long as he came, and the company didn't care at all. Like I said, they didn't pay by the hour anyway.

"And since Britt wasn't a straight arrow like Haynes was, they just figured he had

him a girlfriend somewhere. So when we put that together with what you found out at Flo and Dolly's, we know why the breadman died, and who UNSUB is."

The sheriff nodded. "UNSUB killed the wrong breadman. But we still don't have enough to convict him, do we?"

Roger Dale nodded his head. "We don't have enough to convict, but we've got motive. We know the means. We've got enough for probable cause to get a search warrant. Then I reckon ballistics will give us the hard evidence we need to convict him."

"Ain't you forgetting something?" Bud asked him. "We don't know where to get a search warrant for. We ain't got no idea where that gun is."

The sheriff nodded agreement.

"Now, just you two think," Roger told them. "Sometimes the most important information is what you remember about what you already know instead of what you can find out. Remember, you don't have to have a gun to make a ballistics match. You have to have the bullets that came out of it. Now, let's get down to your night magistrate and get a search warrant. And while we're doing that, we've got another problem to worry about."

"Frank Britt?" said the sheriff.

"Right," said Fornby. "He must've come over here hunting for Donna when he hadn't heard from her like he expected to. By now he knows about the murder and he's figured out it's Jubal, same as we have."

Sheriff Taylor pursed her lips. "I guess we need to put some protection on Jubal Scroggs."

"I reckon so," said Fornby. "He ain't much, but we don't need another murder on our hands, even if the victim's him. How many deputies you got on night duty?"

"Just two, like always," said the sheriff. "For the whole county. I can order one of them to patrol the road around Scroggs Cove and alert him to be looking for Britt. Bud, do we have a special deputy good enough to run surveillance on Jubal's house?"

Davis nodded. "Yeah. Bill Johnson just retired from the Wildlife Service. He's got experience and time on his hands."

"I'll call him in," she said. "And put out a bulletin to other law enforcement to be looking for Britt."

As she keyed the mike to relay the message throughout her office, Roger signaled Bud to start the car. "Let's go get that search warrant," he said.

\*

Early Saturday morning Jubal Scroggs heard someone pounding on his front door. Then he heard a shout.

"Jubal. You in there? Come on out."

He pulled on his pants and raced to the door. When he threw it open, Roger Dale and Sheriff Taylor were standing on his porch. The sheriff was holding a paper. Roger Dale was holding a pistol.

At the foot of the steps stood Bud, Seth, and Billy. Bud was holding a shotgun, Seth a chainsaw, Billy an axe.

Bud pointed to the giant oaks downhill from the house. "Seth, you and Billy can get started on them trees in a minute," he announced loudly.

"The devil they can," Jubal shouted. "What in the name of sand do you think you are doing?"

"We're executing a search warrant," Roger Dale told him. "That's it the sheriff's holding. We'll read it to you in a minute or two. But what it says is that there is probable cause to believe that in them trees there's lead from your .30-.30 and that it will match up with the lead that came out of a dead bread truck driver. After we read it to you, we're fixing to go down to that oak grove. And whenever we find a scar on one of

them trees, we're going to cut a chunk of it to take down to the lab."

"You're not cutting my trees," Jubal said.

"Yeah we are, Jubal. Unless you want to tell us where the rifle is at."

Everybody stood silent for thirty seconds that seemed like that many minutes.

Then Jubal looked straight into Roger's eyes.

"If I tell you, you won't cut down my trees?" he asked.

"Not if you tell me the truth."

Jubal paused again. "It's wrapped in an oilskin in a metal box buried in the first stall down at the barn. There's a load of manure and some straw on top of it," he said at last.

Roger Dale turned to Louise Taylor. "Give him his rights," he told her.

The sheriff took out a pocket card and read the Miranda litany.

"Why'd you do it?" Fornby asked.

He had learned long ago that if you ask a man like Scroggs, "Did you do it?" he's liable not to answer. But if you ask, "Why'd you do it?" he just might tell you. Jubal did.

"He was messing with my wife," Scroggs said. "Everybody in the Cove must have knowed it but me. Then I heard some-



body laughing about it down at the hardware store when they didn't know I was there. They was laughing at me. Talking about her and the breadman. So I made one of them tell me what was going on. Then I found out he came every Friday."

"So that's why you killed him?" Fornby asked.

"Yeah," Jubal said. "Don't you see, Roger Dale? I had to do it. She was my wife."

"And where is she now, Jubal? We checked with her sister. She hasn't talked to her in months."

Again there was a long minute of silence. At last Jubal spoke. "She's buried down in the first stall too."

"Your boy!" Roger shouted. "You didn't kill your boy!"

"No." Jubal didn't hesitate this time. "No, I didn't kill my boy. This place," he gestured expansively, "this is all for him."

"Where is he, Jubal?" Roger Dale asked.

"Over at the reservation. I've got an Indian woman looking after him. I give her my other car to do it."

Roger motioned to Davis to come up the steps. "Cuff him, Bud. Seth! Billy! Lose that saw and stuff. Y'all take Jubal on downtown and come back with some shovels."

As the deputies led Scroggs away, Fornby turned back to the sheriff. "I'd rather be in Hell with my back broke than be Jubal Scroggs when he finds out he killed the wrong breadman."

"Yes," she agreed. "But at least he killed the wife he meant to."

As they talked, they walked on down the stairs to the sheriff's car. Bud Davis was waiting in the driver's seat.

"We had better follow them, hadn't we?" the sheriff asked. "I mean, we still haven't found Britt, and it's not out of the question that he might try to shoot Jubal right there between my deputies."

Davis shook his head. "That's what I thought, too. But I just got a radio call from the Tennessee state police responding to that bulletin we sent out. They found Britt at home, loading everything he owns into a pickup. Had a map marked up on how to get to California. He was just fixin' to go by the bakery and draw his pay. Reckon he's a lover, not a fighter."

"I suppose that night patrol was a waste," said the sheriff.

"No, it wasn't," said Fornby. "If you had needed it and not sent it, that would have been a waste."

\*

The next morning Roger Dale called his supervisor again.

"Bossman, we're in luck. We got a collar out of it. The state's taking murder one for him killing his wife. The breadman he shot from federal parkway land, and we've charged crime on a federal enclave for that one."

"Good," Maloney told him. "You ready to quit playing sheriff and be an FBI agent again?"

"Bossman," Roger said, "I think Gibson County is in very good hands."

"That's very comforting," said Maloney.

"Just one thing, bossman. There's three *other* counties in my territory."

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# Jonathan Frederick Johnson III and the Boogeyman

by Robert Loy

**K***ee-rash!*  
Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's Tinkertoy tower toppled to the floor.

"Damn it!" he yelled. He had been attempting to construct a skyscraper, or more accurately a ceilingscraper, and this was the fourth time it had fallen. "Damn it! Damn it!"

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III did not know what "damn it!" meant, but he knew he was forbidden to say it—had in fact been sentenced to his room the last time Mother had heard him—and he knew Father always said it whenever something happened that he didn't want to happen.

And that was good enough for Jonathan Frederick Johnson III. It must be a very powerful incantation even if it didn't mean anything. He was tucking his tongue behind his two front teeth to say it again—just to hear its wondrous resonance and feel its delicious magic on his lips—when something grabbed the back of his shirt

and lifted him clean off the carpet.

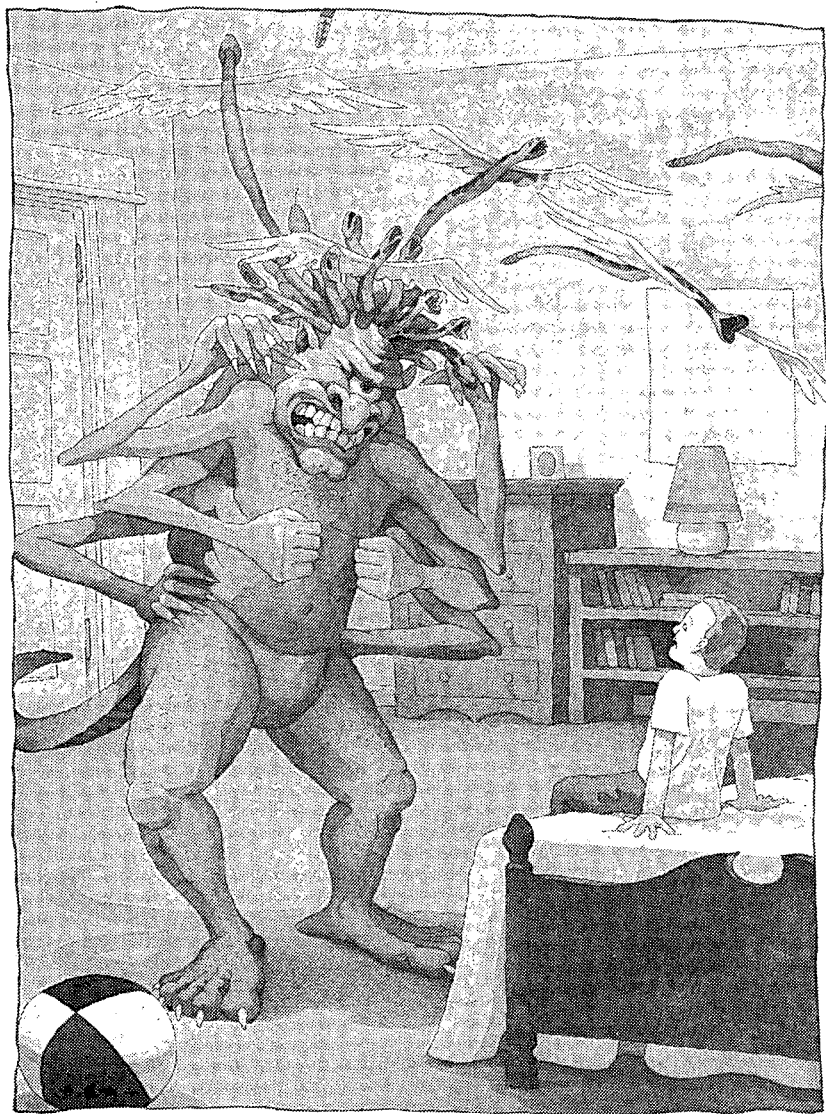
"Young man, don't you never let me hear you talk like that again, you hear?" Miss Rosella Washington said to him in a voice that sounded soft but felt like a holler. "That is *bad* language. You know what happens to little boys what use the bad language, don't you? The Boogeyman comes in the nighttime, grabs 'em up, and hauls 'em off. That's what happens to those boys."

Jonathan waited until his housekeeper returned him to the floor before asking: "Who is the Boogeyman? What does he look like?"

"Don't you go worryin' 'bout what he looks like. Believe you me, you do not wanna know what that ugly old Boogeyman looks like."

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III considered this for a moment and then, because he had been taught to always tell the truth, he said, "Yes, I do."

Miss Rosella Washington scrunched up her forehead the



THE OGRE GNASHED HIS TEETH AND SQUINTED HIS ONE RED EYE. "ALL RIGHT, KID, YOU WANT TO PLAY TOUGH? FINE, LET'S PLAY TOUGH."

way she did when she wanted to pretend she hadn't really heard what she had just heard.

"No, you don't, young man. He's mean and horrible. He comes and carries off bad children in the nighttime—and they never come back."

"I don't care. I want to see him," Jonathan said.

It's true that most children are terrified of the Boogeyman and will do just about anything to keep their names off his kids-to-grab-and-carry-kicking-and-screaming-into-the-nighttime-never-to-be-seen-or-heard-from-again list, but Jonathan Frederick Johnson III was not scared of the Boogeyman. He was not scared of anything.

Well, actually, he was scared of one thing, but he didn't know he was and couldn't have told you what this fear was even had he been aware of its existence. What Jonathan was scared of was that maybe Miss Rosella Washington was wrong and there really was no Boogeyman. He was afraid there might truly be no ghosts in his closet, no witch under his bed, that Batman and Bugs Bunny were just big fat lies and, despite his friends' fiscal evidence to the contrary, there was no fairy interested in purchasing people's newly detached baby teeth. He was terrified that Mother and Father were right

and that life was real, life was earnest, life was magicless and mundane. There was nothing at the end of the rainbow but a puddle of mud.

When he was born, his parents—Mother, a clinical psychologist; Father, a textbook proofreader and editor—decided, with the best of intentions, of course, to isolate their only child from the nymphs and gnomes we all grow up with.

They called it not filling his impressionable young mind with the same old childhood nonsense.

FATHER: *Why should we teach him all the silly balderdash children are fed about Easter bunnies, Santa Claus, and Superman and so on when he's just going to have to unlearn it all when he grows up?*

MOTHER: *Not only that, but he'll undoubtedly have deep-seated unresolved animosities and a subconscious mistrust of authority figures to work through if his principal caregivers consistently lie to him in his early years while his personal paradigm is still being formed.*

FATHER: *Very astute, my dear. Not to encroach upon your professional territory, but I believe this is what holds a lot of people back from reaching their full adult potential. They're still trying to reconcile the lies they were told in the nursery with the*

*cold hard facts they've learned about life on their own. We'll be giving little Jonathan a real head start by teaching him that life is not like Oz or Wonderland—it's real, it's earnest, but not altogether unpleasant.*

(There was only one thing wrong with Mother and Father's plan: Santa Claus and Superman were not going to sit still for it. And they have a zealous corps of missionaries working to spread their word—grandmothers, housekeepers, Steven Spielberg, the kid on the other end of the seesaw, et cetera.)

Mother and Father did their utmost to offset the pernicious effects of unbridled fantasy. The walls in Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's bedroom were adorned with fine art prints from the school of realism, not posters of singing purple dinosaurs or ninja reptiles. His sheets were plain white, no ducks waddling across them or rocket ships orbiting them. For breakfast he was served oatmeal or Cheerios, but nothing with silly rabbits, talking tigers, or snapping, popping elves on the box.

And they were as scrupulously careful about what went into his mind as they were about what went into his mouth.

MOTHER (Up early on Saturday morning doing damage control. Jonathan Frederick Johnson III is watching cartoons. No telling what kind of damage those bright, flashy, downright impossible images could do a developing cerebral cortex.): *Jonathan, honey, listen, why don't you turn off that obnoxious nonsense and watch the Nature Channel or CNN?*

JONATHAN FREDERICK JOHNSON III (No response. He doesn't hear her. He is trying to figure out why the roadrunner always says "Meep-meep!" whenever one of Wile E. Coyote's schemes backfires on him. What does it mean? Is it bad language?)

MOTHER: *Jonathan, you know, of course, that if a real coyote fell off a real cliff like that he would be dead, dead and in—* (She was about to say coyote heaven, but she realizes she's not sure where, if anywhere, dead coyotes go. Fortunately, she catches herself in time.) *—in a smooshed-up pile of fur and bones. These cartoon things are just drawings that give the illusion of movement. You understand that, don't you, Jonathan?*

JONATHAN FREDERICK JOHNSON III: *Meep-meep!* (Which gets him in big trouble for backtalking. From then on he is not allowed to watch anything on TV



unless it is preapproved by Mother or Father.)

No matter, he could always look at books. He loved books, and his parents had procured for him an extensive library of picture books about real children doing real things like helping mom fix dinner, or going to school, where they did all sorts of fun things like sitting still, being quiet, and listening to the teacher. Once he traded his copy of *My Daddy Works in the City* to his friend Kenny Preston for a book about dogs who race cars and have big dog parties in the tops of trees. It was his favorite book until Father explained it to him.

FATHER: *Son, real dogs simply do not behave like this. You've seen old Jake here, and you know what he does. He sleeps and he eats and he barks his head off whenever somebody knocks at the door—well, he doesn't really bark his head off, that's just an expression. But he definitely does not wear funny hats and drive a car. The dogs in this book are imaginary. Do you understand? They're not real like Jake. They're imaginary.*

JONATHAN: *Is "imaginary" bad language? (He doesn't mean it as backtalk.)*

He had to give the book back to Kenny, even though they

had a no-takebacks clause in their contract.

At least he could still be friends with Kenny. Watch what happens when Father meets Toby Redboy.

FATHER: *Jonathan, who are you talking to?*

JONATHAN FREDERICK JOHN-SON III: *I'm talking to Toby Redboy, Father.*

FATHER (putting on his stern, life-is-real face as he walks into his son's room): *Who is this Toby Redboy person? I don't see anyone in here but you.*

JONATHAN: *He's right there by the computer—whoa, you almost ran into him.*

FATHER (making a dramatic pretense of scanning the room): *I still don't see anyone.*

JONATHAN: *He probably doesn't want you to see him right now, Father. I can't see him all the time either, but he's—*

FATHER (sighs heavily, sits down on son's bed, lowers voice): *I thought we were through the danger phase here. You know—I mean, you must know that this Toby Redboy is not real. Now, you have real friends like Kenny and Margie, don't you? Real friends have homes and mothers and fathers. Toby Redboy is not real.*

JONATHAN (considers Father's words till they start to make him dizzy; this real-imaginary



thing still seems completely arbitrary): *But he is real, Father. He talks to me and everything.*

FATHER: *That's just you talking to yourself, son. And that's okay, nothing wrong with that. But it is wrong to give different parts of your personality names and converse with someone who isn't really there. That's what people in the crazy house do. You don't want to wind up in the crazy house, do you? Very well, I do not want to hear any more about this Toby Redboy, do you understand?*

JONATHAN (looking over Father's shoulder to see if Toby Redboy exhibits some symptoms of imaginariness he might have overlooked, but Toby Redboy is making funny faces behind Father's back): *Toby, that's not nice. Meep-meep!* (Jonathan Frederick Johnson III and Toby Redboy have decided that "Meep-meep!" is what the roadrunner says when he laughs, and the two boys have adopted it as their own secret laugh, a way of honoring the roadrunner's memory now that they are no longer allowed to watch his show.)

FATHER (pulling off his belt): *Son, I told you this Toby Redboy is imaginary: now you leave me no choice.* (Reluctantly spanks the hell out of son.)

After that Toby Redboy still came around and tried to play,

but Jonathan Frederick Johnson III ignored him. After awhile Toby Redboy's feelings got hurt badly enough that he went away and never came back.

Jonathan was thinking about — and missing — Toby Redboy and the roadrunner and the dogs with their funny party hats and other friends Father had banished, when he got bored with the PBS special about the amphibians of Africa and went upstairs to his room. He wanted to be a good boy, but sometimes living in Mother and Father's world where everything fun and exciting was imaginary and bad, and everything dead and boring was real and good made him so sad he could hardly stand it. He knew Mother and Father were wrong; they had to be. If only there was a way to show them that everything and everybody are real—they're all just real in different ways—or if anything it was Dan Rather and President Clinton and the amphibians of Africa that were imaginary.

But how could he prove it when Father only bestowed reality status on stuff he could see and many of Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's more colorful friends were notoriously shy and apt to vanish in the presence of grownups? He

tiptoed across his bedroom, opened his door a crack, and peeked out into the hall to make sure Mother and Father weren't out there listening. Then he went back inside, sat on his bed, closed his eyes and very quietly said, "Damn it!"

He opened one eye, looked around the room, but there was no one in it but him.

"Damn it!" he said, a little louder.

Still nothing.

"Damn it!" he shouted, and this time he was angry when he said it—so angry that he kicked his bed. And he must have kicked it too hard because there was an immense crash like thunder. Just then he smelled something yucky behind him—sort of like burning hair only much, much yuckier—so he turned around to see what was causing the stench.

His eyes got big and round, and all of the saliva in his mouth dried up. Once when he was six years old, Mother and Father had taken him to see a nature film. Before it started, coming attractions of *It Came from Hell*, a horror movie, were shown. Mother had covered his eyes, of course, but not before Jonathan Frederick Johnson III had seen the satanic star.

Now, here in his bedroom, striding right toward him, was

that celluloid creature in the flesh.

It was eight feet tall with curved horns on top of its head, hooved feet like a goat, and long sharp fangs. In one paw it held a pitchfork, and in the other a little boy's bloody, severed head. It was growling and drooling, and every step it took toward Jonathan burned a smoky hole in the carpet.

Before he could move or even think about moving, the demon lunged, swooped him up in its claw, held his pajama-clad body over its huge gaping mouth, and licked its lips with its forked tongue.

"Got any last words, kid?" snarled the demon. "Make them fast—I'm hungry!"

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III squirmed around till he was looking right in the monster's blood red eyes.

"You're the Boogeyman, aren't you?" he said.

That question only seemed to make the monster madder and meaner. It tightened its grip on his neck and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"I am going to eat you, kid, don't you get it? Chew you up and swallow you. You are going to die a slow, horrible, agonizing death, and nobody can save you. Now, stop asking stupid questions and do like you're supposed to do—cry! scream!

beg for the mercy you're not going to—hey, cut that out!"

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III was playing with the monster's horns.

"Are these real?" he asked. "Can I hold your pitchfork? You *are* the Boogeyman, aren't you? I mean the real Boogeyman, not one of the Boogeyman's helpers or anything?"

Steam shot out of the monster's ears. He threw Jonathan Frederick Johnson III down onto his bed and then changed into something even uglier—a one-eyed, six-armed ogre with writhing, hissing rattlesnakes for hair.

*Whoof!* The ogre conjured up a fireball out of thin air, then rared back its middle right hand and hurled the ball of fire straight at Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's face.

Jonathan did not even blink. And the fireball vanished a split second before it hit him.

The ogre gnashed his teeth and squinted his one red eye. "All right, kid, you want to play tough? Fine, let's play tough."

The rattlesnakes on his head sprouted wings and launched an aerial attack on Jonathan Frederick Johnson III, flapping and snapping all around him.

"Ha, ha, ha, yes, my beauties, that's it. Dig your fangs deep into his tender young—

hey! What do you think you're doing?"

Jonathan had caught one of the flying vipers and was holding it up to his cheek, nuzzling and petting and cooing to it.

The ogre roared with rage and frustration.

"Cool," Jonathan said. "Let's go downstairs. You gotta show that fireball trick to Father."

"Ohh, kid, I'm going to—" The rattlesnakes disappeared, and the ogre changed shape again, this time metamorphizing into a slimy, scaly, crocodile-looking thing. He kept his six arms, however, and without warning he leapt at Jonathan and pinned him to the bed with all six of them.

"Say your prayers, kid," the crocodile creature snarled. "You've made me mad now, and you're going to pay for it with your life."

Jonathan just smiled. He was hoping Father would come upstairs and see him playing with his new, thoroughly-real friend, the Boogeyman—er, Boogeydile.

"All right, watch this, wisenheimer." So fast that Jonathan could hardly see what was happening, the Boogeydile shredded the pillow next to his head till it was nothing but dust and feathers floating around the room. "And you're next. Now you're scared, you hear me?"

You're terrified. Frightened completely out of your wits. I know you are, so no more of this—"

"Meep-meep!"

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III reached up and honked his new friend's snout—well, tried to honk it. But when he did, the tip fell off, bounced on the bedspread, and rolled off onto the floor.

The Boogeydile flew up off the bed, balled his scaly hands into fists, and stomped both feet on the floor. It looked like he was going to throw a temper tantrum. Father would be sure to come up now.

But all of a sudden the croc-monster stopped stomping and started pacing.

"It's all right, everything's under control. I just gotta stay cool," he said to himself. "I'm not out of tricks yet, not by a long shot. But—damn it!—this kid's a tough nut to crack."

Jonathan wondered what horrific otherworldly creature would show up when the Boogeyman himself said the magic "damn it!" word, but nothing happened except that the chunks of ceiling plaster that had started to fall while the beast was stomping continued to rain down periodically. Where was Father? He must hear all of this going on.

"All right, what's the problem here, kid?" The Boogeydile stopped walking back and forth and turned to talk to Jonathan. "I know it's not me; I'm doing my job—and I am one scary son-a-B, too, I know that. So it's gotta be you. You should've been peeing in your pajamas and screaming for mama a long time ago. So what's the deal? Are you deaf and blind? Are you brain-damaged in some way? Or is Allen Funt hiding in the closet?"

"Heck no, buddy." Jonathan rolled off the bed and grabbed one of the Boogeydile's scaly hands. "There's nothing wrong with me. Now, come on, I'll help you find the rest of your nose. We gotta go show Father—or no, hey, I got it—turn back into that red thing with the pitchfork and the horns and all. That was way cooler."

The monster flung Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's hand away in disgust and started pacing around the room again. First he talked to the ceiling, then he talked to the floor, all the while waving and punching the air with his six arms. It was really funny to see a crocodile talk at all, much less talk so dramatically and gesticulatively, but Jonathan could tell his new friend was upset about something, so he politely stifled his laughter.

"I *do not* believe this. This I simply *do not* believe. I mean, I know I've been a little off my game lately, what with this flu and everything—but *this!* This is just . . . *unbelievable*. Turn back into that red thing with the pitchfork, he says. *Red thing with the pitchfork!* That was way cooler, he says. *Way cooler!"*

The monster stopped pacing and knelt down in front of Jonathan.

"Okay, kid, I admit you're the greatest actor in the world, better than—I mean way cooler than me, and I'm better than Barrymore. So that makes you the greatest. Very well, I admit it, and I take my hat off to you. Now tell me the truth—you really are scared, aren't you? Come on, just a little bit scared. You cover it well, but it's all right, you can tell me. *Please* tell me."

Jonathan wanted to make his friend feel better, but Mother and Father had taught him never to tell a lie, so he had to shake his head.

"Not at all? Look—look at all these teeth, every one of them sharp as a brand new razor. And hey, how about all these arms and these claws? Don't you know I've scared all your friends and classmates many, many times? They really hate to see me coming, let me tell

you. Why, just the other night I—" the Boogeydile reached between two chest scales and whipped out a notebook, opened it, and flipped through the pages till he found the information he was looking for—"I made Wesley Haynes—Wesley Haynes; the bully who stole your shoes and made you walk through that sticker bush—I made Wesley cry like a baby. Remember when he didn't come to school one day last week because he was sick? He wasn't sick; he was exhausted from lying awake scared to death all night long. Now, if I can do that to Wesley Haynes, surely I can—and Jean-Claude Van Damme, I scared the *merde* out of him when he was your—"

"Come on, let's get downstairs before the news comes on. Father won't talk to anybody after the news starts." Jonathan Frederick Johnson III knew, of course, that it was bad manners to interrupt someone, but he was beginning to think the Boogeydile would go on talking all night long and never meet Father.

"So this is not a gag. You're really not afraid of me."

Jonathan thought the monster was going to cry when he said this. Then he thought the monster was going to hit him.

But in the end he did neither of these things.

Instead he transformed again.

This time he turned into a man with long graying hair tied in a ponytail, bluejeans, cowboy boots, and a purple T-shirt that had "Moby Grape" written on the front. The man had only two arms, no pitchfork, no claws, no rattlesnakes.

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III, who had dashed to the door the moment the transformation began, anxious to go give Father a lesson in reality now that the Boogeyman was finally getting into the spirit of things, froze, his hand on the knob, when he saw what his formerly ferocious friend had become.

"No, don't do that," he said. "You look real now. Change back into—"

"What are you talking about, kid? I'm not—" The man, evidently unaware that he was no longer a crocodile, looked down at his new body.

"Oh no, God please nooo!" he screamed. "Not now—not me!" He examined his hands with disgust, then punched Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's closet door off its hinges. "Please! Puh-leeze give me one more chance! I can scare him, just don't do this to me now!"

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III wanted to comfort his friend—put his arm around him, tell him don't worry, change into another monster, we'll play some more, you don't have to meet Father till you're ready—but the man was pacing around so fast and kicking the furniture so hard Jonathan couldn't get close to him.

"What are you hollering about?" he asked. "That costume you're wearing now's not scary at all."

The man's legs collapsed under him, and he sat on the floor, trying to tear his hair out with both hands.

"Just shut up, kid. You have no idea of the magnitude of the tragedy that just happened here. Damn it, I can't believe the big guy fired me. I'm the best you ever had, you hear me?" He shook his fist at the ceiling. "What am I going to do now? Go back to waiting tables and hope for another big break? I've had this role for almost thirty years and I probably won't even be able to list it on my resume. Geez, all I know is being the Boogeyman, and now I'm going to have to—"

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III clapped his hands together in spontaneous delight.

"I knew it! I knew it!" he sang. "I knew you were the Boogeyman."

The Boogeyman stared at Jonathan for a long minute. Then he took his hands out of his hair and sat back on his heels. He looked calmer and less crazy than he had a minute ago, but he still didn't look happy.

"Yeah, 'were' being the key word here, kid. I was the best and scariest Boogeyman since the late Middle Ages. I was the Boogeyman for longer than anybody else the past two centuries, and I would've broken Arnold Feldstein's record in another couple of years. I was the Boogeyman who brought heart and soul back to the part; it was never just another job to me. I was the Boogeyman who scared them all on every continent, never turned down an assignment. And this is the thanks I get—fired, axed, the big boot-eroo. Yes, I was the Boogeyman and proud of it, too. And now I am nothing, an unemployed actor, brought down by a mere slip of a lad with a bad haircut and not enough sense to know when to be scared. Well, at least now I know how old Grizelda, the Wicked Witch of the West, felt—except, of course, that you're not wearing ruby slippers."

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III wasn't sure what all the Boogeyman was talking about, but he did know what you're

supposed to do when you're introduced to someone.

"How do you do?" he said, extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Mister Boogeyman."

"You still don't get it, do you, kid? I'm not the Boogeyman any more. I'm not anything any more. You only get one mistake in this biz, and that's it, you're out. You meet one fearless kid, one kid you can't scare, and bam, you're back on the street. But what the hell, there's no such thing as a fearless kid, right? Especially not with such a redoubtable Boogeymeister as myself on the job. Oh, I heard the rumors, all right, but—"

The grayhaired man saw that Jonathan still had his hand stuck out. He sighed heavily and shook it.

"Yeah, yeah, nice to meet you, Fearless. Don't worry about ruining my career and my life and everything, no big deal." He riffled through Jonathan's stack of science and nature magazines. "Say, you wouldn't happen to have the new *Variety* lying around, would you? No, I guess you wouldn't—you don't even have any comic books or *Mads*. You know, there's something very definitely not right about you, kid."

"I'm not allowed to read comic books at home. Father says they—"



"Right, okay, I understand. Well, you're a lovely kid and I wish I could stay here and chat with you all evening, but if you'll excuse me, there's some pavements I gotta pound. Hmm, I wonder if that grandpa role on *All My Children* is still open."

The ex-Boogeyman closed his eyes and placed his fingertips on his temples.

After a moment he opened his eyes, looked around Jonathan Frederick Johnson III's bedroom like he didn't know where he was, and hit himself on the knee.

"Great! Now he's taken my teleporting abilities, too. How the hell am I supposed to get home?" he asked the ceiling. "You ungrateful, dog-faced, slave-driving—hey, kid, you got a phone, right? Mind if I use it?"

"Sure, I'll show you where it is," Jonathan told him. "It's downstairs right by Father's chair."

"I know where it is. And listen, kid, don't get your hopes up. The paternal one is not going to be able to see or hear me—I hope."

He stood up and walked over to the door.

"Wait!" Jonathan said.

The Boogeyman turned around. "Yeah?"

"I am a little scared now."

The Boogeyman smiled a sad smile. "Thanks, kid. I appreciate the thought." And he turned and left the room.

But Jonathan Frederick Johnson III had been telling the truth. And now that the Boogeyman was gone, he was more than a little scared. He was scared of what the rest of his life was going to be like now that he had inadvertently killed the Boogeyman.

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III felt a little bit like he was going to cry. He had found proof positive that Mother and Father were wrong about the way the world worked; it wasn't just Dan Rather and newspapers and African amphibians that were real. The Boogeyman was real—had been right here in his own room. But now he was gone. He wasn't even the Boogeyman any more. Everything had changed. It was unquestionably Mother and Father's world, and Jonathan Frederick Johnson III was a prisoner in it. The worst thing was that it was his own fault.

Sadly, he figured he might as well get ready for bed. For as long as he could remember he had had a witch living under his bed. He had never told Father about it because he didn't want him to kill her, make her imaginary. Usually he hopped into bed from a few feet away,

out of her reach. But tonight he got down on his hands and knees to look for her. There was now nothing under his bed but dust. He was wondering if he still had his old nightlight around somewhere when—

“*Boo!*” The bedroom door burst open, and a man with a Moby Grape T-shirt and a paper grocery bag over his head jumped into the room. “Well? Did I scare you?”

“Boogeyman, you’re back! Cool, I’m so glad to see you. Come on in.” Then Jonathan remembered the game his friend wanted to play. “I mean—whoa, you scared me.”

“Yeah, right.” The Boogeyman pulled off the paper bag and walked over to the window. “I should’ve known that wasn’t going to work. Trying to scare this kid without my powers is like trying to stop a stegosaurus with a broken BB gun. Still, hope springs eternal—cuz hope is a damn fool.”

“I was afraid you were gone for good,” Jonathan told him, “that you weren’t ever coming back.”

“Ironical choice of words there, kid. If you were really *afraid* I was gone for good, then of course I would be gone—out terrifying the prepubescent population better than anybody else in the history of Boogeydom. No, you *thought* I was

gone for good, and so did I. But the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune are not done pricking me yet. Get this.” The Boogeyman sat down in the desk chair.

“I call up Santa—my old buddy Kris Kringle, right? I say hey, my friend, I’m in a bit of a bad spot here, can you come give me a lift back to L.A.? And he says sorry, BM, can’t do it, the reindeer are all getting shod tonight. Can you believe that—getting *shod*. What do they need shoes for? They fly, for God’s sake. No, the truth is he just doesn’t want to be seen with an unemployed loser. Nobody—not even Father Christmas—loves you when you’re down and out.”

“You know Santa Claus? He’s real?”

“Yes, yes, and no way, forget it. Yes, I know him. Yes, he’s real—for now. Someday he’s going to meet a kid somewhere who’s not overcome with joy or greed or whatever it is at the sight of him, and then he’ll be just another overweight elderly man with a loud suit, a frigid wife, and a hefty Purina Reindeer Chow bill. And no way, forget it, I’m not going to slip him your Christmas list or put in a good word for you. Not that a good word from me would help you much. I’m nobody—the big Boogeyflop. Oh, I

called my agent, too, but he wasn't taking any calls. Now there's a big shock for ya."

"So what are you going to do?" Jonathan asked him. "You can stay here if you want to, you know. I'll sleep on the floor, I don't mind. You can have the bed."

"Thanks, kid, you're too kind. But I've got a ride coming—the Tooth Fairy." The Boogeyman laughed, but Jonathan could tell he didn't really think it was funny. "Can you believe it? Me, the fearsome frightful Boogeyman forced to hitch a ride on the molar express. Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

"The Tooth Fairy's coming? here? tonight?" The Tooth Fairy had never come to see Jonathan Frederick Johnson III before, even when his baby teeth fell out. He figured Mother and Father probably scared him—or her—away.

"Yeah, and I have to wait for him here if you don't mind. He can't go into grownups' rooms for some reason. Tooth Fairy union rules, I guess. Listen, I need just one more favor from you, kid. I need you to go to sleep. Timothy won't come around when a kid's awake. It's a real phobia with him—I think he's afraid he'll be mistaken for a mosquito and get swatted or something. Anyway,

if you'll go see the Sandman, I'll try to keep my sobbing at minimum decibels, and I'll sit way over here so the stench of rotted dreams and utter abject failure won't disturb you."

"Well, okay." Jonathan Frederick Johnson III wasn't at all sleepy, but he pulled the covers up and laid his head down on the pillow. All was quiet for about a minute and a half; then the Boogeyman started talking, softly at first, then gradually louder. Jonathan sat up in bed. There was a question he wanted to ask him.

"How come you only scare kids?"

"Are you kidding me, kid? I want you to listen carefully. In fact—here, take this." The Boogeyman dug through Jonathan's school supplies and tossed a notebook at him. "You can be my Boswell. Ready? I scared 'em *all* in my day—princes and presidents, kings and counselors, the high and the mighty, the brave and the meek, the proud and the prejudiced, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Just name somebody. If they're alive, you can bet I've scared them. And if they're dead, I probably scared them that way."

"You mean grownups?"

"How many kid kings and kid counselors do you know? Yes, grownups. After all,

grownups are just big kids—no, that's almost a cliché. Change it to kids are just little grownups. You are getting all this down, aren't you?"

Jonathan pulled the empty notebook back where the Boogeyman couldn't see it. If he really expected him to write all this down, he shouldn't be talking so fast.

"But how can you scare grownups if they can't see or hear you?"

"Oh, they see me, all right. It's just that they see a different kind of hobgoblin from the one you do. They see me as being late for work or short on the rent or unprepared for a presentation."

"That doesn't sound very scary."

"Well, of course it doesn't sound scary to you, Kid Fearless. But just the possibility of being late or unprepared scares the mess out of the middle-aged if you do it right—and buddy, you better believe I did it right. It's subtler and more challenging than scaring kids. No two adults have the exact same bugaboos. You have to, as Jeeves would say, consider the psychology of the individual."

Jonathan Frederick Johnson III quietly laid the notebook aside. There was no way he was ever going to be able to spell

words like "psychology" and "individual."

"Who is Jeeves? Is he a Boogeyman, too?"

"Never mind, I don't know why I'm giving you these pearls of Boogey wisdom anyway." The Boogeyman, who had been pacing around the room as he talked, now sank back down into the desk chair. "Why should I tell you—the tyke who toppled my empire—anything at all? Even if you had the maturity to appreciate the elegance and the artistry involved in frightening adults—which you don't. Geez, where is Timothy, that damn cuspid hustler? I'm starting to feel like a doddering old fool in his anecdotage, sitting around the old Boogeys' home telling war stories."

"Hey, I've got an idea," Jonathan told his friend. "Let's go scare a grownup right now. Let's scare Father."

"Yeah, right. It wasn't just my pride and my dignity the big guy stripped me of, remember? I can't teleport. I can't transmogrify. There is not an ounce of Boogey left in this body. I'm an impotent imp. I couldn't even startle a deer."

"Well, you can still turn invisible like you did when you went to use the phone, right? Father didn't see you, so you

must still have some of your powers."

"Oh, I get it. You want another chuckle at the poor old Boogeyflop's expense. Very well, never let it be said that I disappointed an audience." The Boogeyman stood up, and his voice got very big as he said, "Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. For one show only, I, the great Ozymandius, shall completely debase myself for your amusement. Gaze upon my works, ye mighty, and guffaw."

The Boogeyman closed his eyes and placed the tips of his thumbs under his chin.

"See, kid, nothing's hap—"

All of a sudden Jonathan Frederick Johnson III and the Boogeyman were not in the bedroom any more. They were in a strange pink bathroom. A woman wearing nothing but slippers on her feet and a towel around her head was looking at herself in the mirror. She was alone.

"Oh my God!" she yelled at her reflection.

And just like that Jonathan Frederick Johnson III and the Boogeyman were back where they started from.

The whole thing happened so fast Jonathan wasn't completely sure it really happened at all. His head was spinning, and he didn't know if it was be-

cause of the quick Dramamine-less trip or his first sight of a real live naked woman.

"Well, what do you know," said the Boogeyman. "I do still have a little of the old razzle-dazzle left in me. Man, that felt good! Don't know how I managed to sneak it past the big guy, but man, that felt good!"

"What happened? Who was that lady?" Jonathan asked. "Why did she yell? Did she see us?"

"That was Mrs. Cardanella over on the next block. I was scheduled to haunt her next, and I guess that's why we zapped over there when I closed my eyes to inventory my adult-spooking abilities. And hell yeah, she saw me; that's why she yelled. I was the new wrinkle on her forehead. Pretty impressive, eh, kid? And that was off the cuff, with no planning or preparation or anything."

"I knew you could do it. Let's scare Father now."

"No, too easy. Your dear old dad's almost entirely motivated by fear. And since I've only got enough juice for one, maybe two, more grownup-spookings, I want to go for something challenging and memorable. Go out in that proverbial blaze of glory. Now, do you know any adults who are hard to horrify?"

"One time Larry Watson put a toad in Miss Whipperstaff's desk. And she didn't jump or scream or anything. She just picked up the toad and took it outside."

"Fine, Miss Whipperstaff it is, then. But you're going to have to stay here, kid. It's strictly verboten to reveal any of this backstage Boogeyman stuff. If the incisor-mobile gets here while I'm gone, tell him I'll be right back."

"Please take me with you," Jonathan pleaded. "I won't tell anybody. And hey, maybe if you scare Miss Whipperstaff good enough, it'll scare me, too, and you'll get your job and your powers all the way back."

The Boogeyman rubbed the palms of his hands together. Jonathan could tell his friend was almost as excited about scaring Miss Whipperstaff as he was.

"Well, hell, I suppose I should get used to working with an audience again. And what are you going to do?" the Boogeyman asked the ceiling. "Fire me? I'm already fired. All right, kid, fasten your seat belt. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

And the Boogeyman was right. It was a bumpy ride. First the room turned upside-down, then it turned sideways, and then it started spinning so fast Jonathan Frederick John-

son III couldn't tell which way it was turning. A bright light—like the sun coming up all at once in the middle of the night—flashed, and when his eyes had adjusted, he was in his classroom at Harbor View Elementary School—well, sort of in it, sort of above it. He could see and hear everything and everybody, but nobody could see him. It was like he was floating around the room, invisible. He looked at the third desk in the fourth row behind Angela Mazcylyk, and there he—Jonathan Frederick Johnson III—was. He was in two places at one time, flying unseen about the room and sitting at his desk reading a *Flash* comic book hidden in his notebook. It felt weird to be looking at himself like that, sort of like hearing your own voice on a tape recorder, only weirder.

"All right, kid, face front. I've got a peg on Miss Whipperstaff's psychology, and the show is about to start."

He could hear but not see the Boogeyman beside him. He turned to the front of the class where Miss Whipperstaff, her black hair pulled back in a bow, was pointing to a poster of two children smiling and shaking hands.

"All right, class, today we're going to learn more about good citizenship," she said. "Yester-

day we talked about manners and how important they are. Who can give me an example of—”

A sharp knock on the door.

Mr. Lavalier, the assistant principal, didn't even wait for Miss Whipperstaff to say "Come in." He poked his bald head through the door and said:

"Doris, please forgive me for interrupting your class like this, but I need to speak to you right away. It's about us."

"Mr. Lavalier, not now, please." Jonathan Frederick Johnson III was so close to Miss Whipperstaff he could see the funny way she kept cutting her eyes and rolling her head over at the kids as she talked. "I will see you at lunchtime in the supply—in our usual place."

"I'm sorry, but this can't wait," Mr. Lavalier said. "And it won't take but a minute. I just wanted to tell you that I can't see you any more. I've decided to go back to my wife."

Miss Whipperstaff's bottom lip started to quiver, and then there were tears in her eyes and on her cheeks. Jonathan Frederick Johnson III couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had no idea teachers ever actually cried.

"Oh, Marcel, how could you?" The pointer stick slipped from Miss Whipperstaff's hand and

hit the floor. Tears were running off her face now, and she didn't even try to wipe them away. "You told me you loved me. Just last night you promised me we'd be together for—"

"Lower the curtain, roll the credits, hand me the statuette," said the Boogeyman. Jonathan looked around. They were back in his bedroom.

"Well, what did you think?" the Boogeyman asked. "A bravura performance, wouldn't you say?"

"That never happened to Miss Whipperstaff; I would remember that for sure," Jonathan told him. "And it can't be happening now because school is closed."

"No, Miss Whipperstaff has not been unceremoniously dumped yet. Nor has Mrs. Cardanella discovered that forehead furrow. I told you grown-ups were more complicated. Kids' fears are usually immediate, but you've got to work in the fourth dimension with adults. They're not so afraid of what is happening, but they're terrified of what's going to happen. And make no mistake, it will happen. If you worry about—worry is just the grownup word for Boogeyman, for fear—something long enough and strong enough, eventually it's going to happen. Every time without fail. That's



a universal law Haggerdorn MacRooley, the legendary Boogeyman of the Dark Ages, lobbied tirelessly to get passed."

"But *when* is it going to happen?" Jonathan Frederick Johnson III wanted to be sure he didn't miss school that day.

"I don't know. Sometime in the future. When I'm on a roll, I can scare a twenty-year-old about his retirement, a thirty-year-old about how many people are going to show up at his funeral, a forty-year-old about what he's going to do with his time after he's been in heaven a couple of centuries and is starting to get bored with harp concertos. Truly I am the master of fear and of time." The Boogeyman's chest deflated. "I mean I was the master of fear and of time. Now I'm the master of disaster, a broken Boogeyman, a dark angel de-winged."

"Okay, scare Father now," Jonathan Frederick Johnson III said.

"You've got a real one-tracker there, don't you, kid? Just dying to see Dad come undone. Well, sorry, I already told you I'm not going to waste my last little bit of Boogeyjuice on an easy mark. Why have you got it in for your old man anyway?"

"I don't. I just want you to scare him because . . . because I don't think you can do it, that's why."

"So you think he's a real giant-killer, too, is that it, Jack? Like son, like father? Kid Fearless and his—"

"No!" Jonathan Frederick Johnson III shouted. "Father and I are not at all alike."

"Oh, really?" The Boogeyman's eyes sort of glazed over, and he took a couple of steps backward and started talking softly to himself. Jonathan Frederick Johnson III made out "well, maybe," and "worth a shot," but that was it.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," the Boogeyman answered, "I was just doing some psychology homework. Hang on, kid. It's showtime."

The Boogeyman put his thumbs under his chin, the room spun around again. And this time when Jonathan Frederick Johnson III could tell where he was, he was in Father's study. Father was sitting in his uncomfortable leather chair reading a paper—but not a newspaper; it had lines on it like the paper Jonathan Frederick Johnson III used in school. It was easy to see that Father was mad. He did not like this paper at all.

"Jonathan, come in here, son," he yelled from his chair. "I want to see you right now."

And then a boy came bounding into the room, but Jonathan Frederick Johnson III the invisible fly did not even look at Jonathan Frederick Johnson III the boy. He flew in for a closer look at Father. Something about his face didn't look quite right. He looked older, tired.

"Son, I've been reading over this paper you wrote for school about what you did over the summer vacation. It says here you climbed a mountain on the moon and went to the North Pole with Superman. Now, you know none of that is true. It's all imaginary. And what did I tell you about imaginary things?"

Yep, that was Father, all right. Still said the word "imaginary" like it tasted bad in his mouth. Still made his life-is-real, life-is-earnest face. When was the Boogeyman going to give it to him?

The boy said nothing, and when Jonathan Frederick Johnson III the invisible fly turned to look at himself, he was surprised to see that it was not he, not Jonathan Frederick

Johnson III the boy. It was a kid he had never seen before. Could this be what Father was afraid of? That his son would somehow get a new face?

"I'm waiting, son," said Father. "What do you have to say about this disgraceful paper?"

He turned the paper around to show it to the boy.

And when he did, Jonathan Frederick Johnson III the invisible fly saw the name printed at the top of the page.

Jonathan Frederick Johnson IV.

He looked back at the man he thought was Father and then at the paper again, trying desperately to make some sense out of all this. Then in one horrifying instant he knew exactly what it was he was seeing, and from somewhere way down deep inside himself Jonathan Frederick Johnson III screamed.

The last thing he saw before he landed back in his bedroom was a red beast with horns and a pitchfork smile and wink at him.

"See you later, kid," said the Boogeyman.



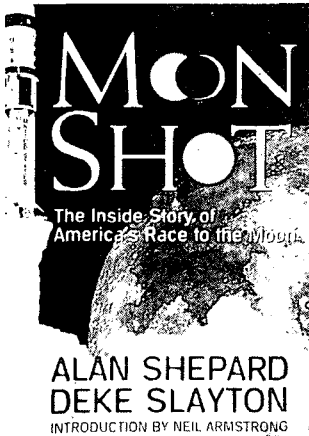
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# Birds of Paradise

by S. J. Rozan

**T**he sky was dazzlingly blue, the air was shirt-sleeve warm for the first time this season, and as I drove up the highway beside the Hudson, I could see two hawks circling a distant hill. In the expansive early-Sunday, early-spring silence, with the hill-sides yellow-green and the streams rushing with meltwater, it was easy to believe that at least some problems could be solved.

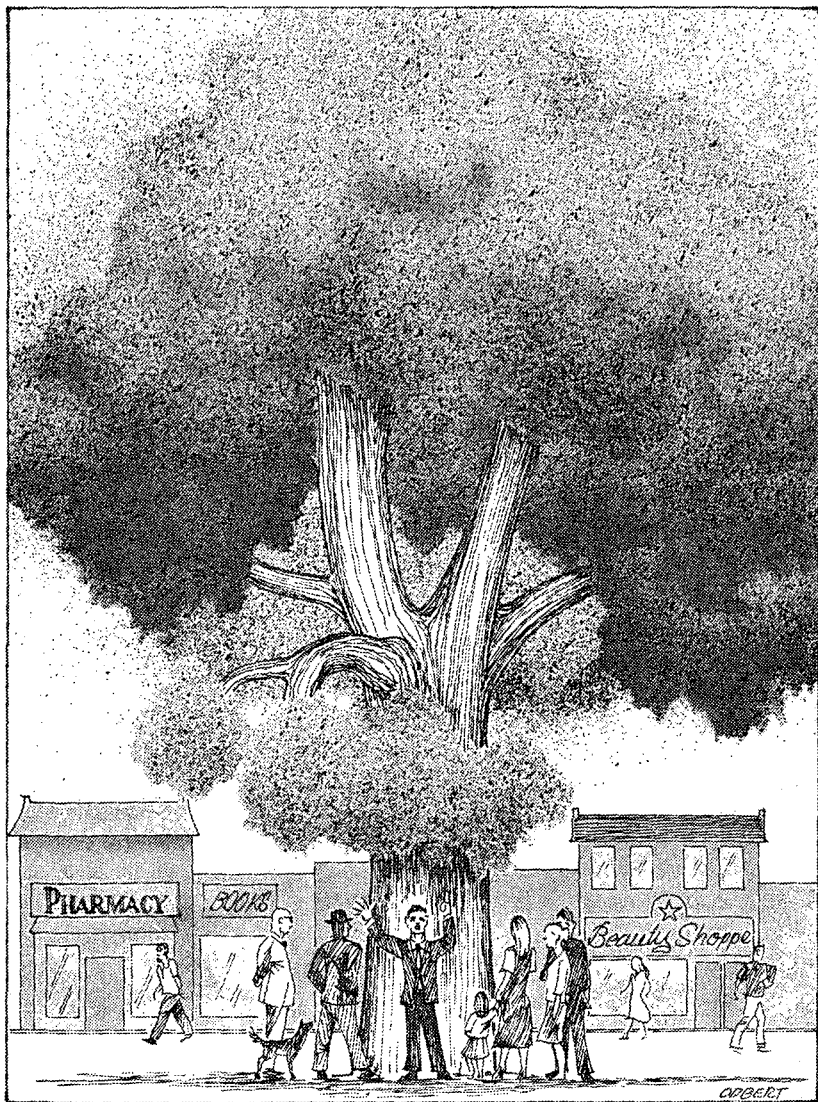
I turned off the highway onto the county road that would take me to Hanover, to the cheerful neighborhood of wood-frame houses where Pearl and Harry lived. I didn't go through town; we'd go into town later when Harry was ready to open the store and show me the phenomenon he'd brought me up here to see.

Harry Hershkowitz sold hardware in Hanover, which he'd always said qualified him to join the 4-H club. Not that he ever had: "From the end of the horse that eats the oats, I wouldn't know." Hanover, a big town for this part of the state—it supports an elementary

school, a synagogue, and eight churches—is a forty minute drive from the cabin I have two counties over. It was a drive I'd learned to make after the locals let me in on the secret: for three-penny nails or hacksaw blades, the Agway was fine, but when you needed just the right bracket or reverse-threaded screw, you needed Hershkowitz's.

And now, according to Harry, Hershkowitz's needed me.

The door to the small, neat house opened as I pulled into the driveway. Harry, bent, bald, spry, and smiling, trotted down to the car, shook my hand, tugged me through the door and into the sunny kitchen. Pearl, also wrinkled, also smiling, kissed my cheek, poured me coffee, and ordered Harry to leave me alone until I'd eaten. I surveyed the kitchen table: platters of smoked fish, tubs of cream cheese, a mound of sliced tomatoes, and a basket of seeded rye and bagels crowded together as though they had stopped jostling each other for position just before I walked in.



THE TREE WAS HUGE, THE CROWD WAS SMALL, BUT THE PREACHER UNDER A DROOPING BRANCH WAS GIVING THEM HIS ALL: THE ARM-WAVING, THE FINGER-POINTING, AND THE BURNING EYES.

Illustration by Jim Odbert

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I turned to Pearl, feeling a little helpless. "I ate," I said. "Before I left."

"So?" Harry pulled out a chair. "This means you can never eat again?"

"Sit," Pearl smiled. "Drink your coffee, nibble. Harry doesn't open the store until noon on Sundays, and the preachers don't come until eleven thirty the earliest, so what would be the point in rushing?"

So I sat, sipped strong coffee, and arranged tomato and smoked trout on a half bagel. "Tell me about the preachers," I said.

Pearl made a disgusted, dismissive sound. She poured Harry coffee; he wagged his finger at me. "I'm telling you, it's people like this who give men of the cloth a bad name."

"I didn't know men of the cloth had a bad name," I said. "I think they're pretty generally respected."

"Of course they are," Pearl said. "The way they should be. We've always gotten along so well with our neighbors, such nice people in this town. Our children went to day camp at the Y. This is why Harry doesn't open the store until noon on Sunday, from respect for their church services. And all the customers understand we don't open on Saturday.

Never a problem, always everyone with their differences living side by side."

"For thirty-five years." Harry picked up the story. "Until suddenly comes this *goniff*, he—"

"Goniff?"

"This thief, this fast-talking con man, Gull. The Reverend Lester Gull, you should excuse me. He could steal the words right out of your mouth, the Reverend Lester Gull. Do you know the Aerie Motel?"

"Up on Route Six? Restaurant, and a dozen little cabins? Abandoned?"

"Abandoned not any more. The Reverend Lester Gull bought the whole place last spring. Did a little bit of fixup, reopened as Heaven's Messenger Bible School. Bible School! The man wouldn't know from a Bible if one fell out of Heaven and hit him on the head."

"This, of course, is not true," Pearl interrupted. "The Reverend Gull is a very learned man. He quotes his Bible all over the place, from memory. Which only proves that learning and wisdom are not the same thing."

"All right," I said to Harry. "So we have the Reverend Lester teaching the word of the Lord up in the old motel. What's the problem?"



"Up in the old motel there wouldn't be a problem. In front of my store there's a problem."

"Which is?"

Harry sighed. "Hershkowitz's sits, which of course you know, in the best spot on Main Street. Right on the corner, nobody has to walk too far, you could get there from anywhere. And shaded, for the customer's convenience, by the old oak tree who grows on the sidewalk in front. Two hundred years old, he was in that spot when the British were here. Which I don't by the way remember, no matter what Pearl tells you."

Pearl patted Harry's cheek.

"I know the tree," I said. "The sidewalk widens there to let you walk around it."

"Right!" said Harry. "Which is what people do, now that the Reverend Lester Gull has come to town."

"He tells them it's the will of God that they should walk around the tree?"

"Don't joke, this is not a funny situation."

"I apologize," I grinned. "Please continue."

"Lester Gull," Harry said with great dignity, "doesn't even come to the tree himself. Except to stand in the crowd. It's his students who make my customers walk around the tree."

"Harry—"

"Harry, please, you're giving the man heartburn. You eat, I'll talk." Pearl turned to face me. "Reverend Gull is training, what do you call them, they preach on TV."

"Televangelists."

"That's right, such a silly word. Maybe they believe what they say, maybe they don't. But religion isn't what they learn from Reverend Gull anyway. From him they learn how to ask for money."

"Specifically?"

"You bet specifically," Harry broke in. "How to stand under my tree on Sunday afternoon and harangue my customers. They preach and preach and they ask and ask, and the customers get so upset they don't come on Sundays any more, which is my biggest day because all the weekend people like you when else are they going to come? But now they don't come, they shouldn't have to know from the Reverend Lester Gull's students doing their homework."

"That's what it is, their homework?"

"Homework," Harry asserted. "Their assignment, should they choose to accept it, is to make people feel bad until they give money. Last summer they started this, this practice for picking your pocket. Over the winter they don't come, but



last month they're back like the birds flying north. My customers are too smart to give money to a fake—" he said this proudly "—but they're too good not to feel bad when someone asks and they don't give. So what happens? My customers, they need a left-handed wall stretcher, they come to Hershkowitz's. While they're there, it shouldn't be a total loss, they buy paint, they buy brushes, they buy hammers, they buy nails. But now the preachers yell at them, fire and brimstone and give us money. The customers say, 'Paint and brushes and hammers and nails we can get at the Agway, those guys won't bother us.' So to Hershkowitz's they don't come any more, unless for a left-handed wall stretcher. And you can't make a living, my friend, selling those."

Harry finished his tale, looked at me mournfully.

"You've talked to the sheriff?" I asked.

"Don Brown, I voted for him four times already. 'Harry,' he tells me, 'I'm sorry, but they got a right. The old oak's in front of your store, but it's public property. People got a right to give any kind of speech they want there. Nothing I can do.'"

"And you talked to the Reverend Gull?"

"The Reverend Gull," Harry was affronted, "suggested I consider joining his flock. He said I had the makings of a first-class TV preacher. Can you believe this? I told him—"

"What you told him," said Pearl, "you will not repeat in this house, in front of our friend. It was not nice," she added to me.

"I'll bet," I said. "So. What do you want me to do?"

"Something smart," Harry said. "You're a big-city private eye, a very smart man. I want you to think of something very smart, to make the Reverend Lester Gull and his phony preachers go away."

Harry and I walked through Hanover to the center of town. Kids rode bikes, and dogs chased after them through the bright sun and sharp shadows. Tulips and daffodils glowed in front gardens, and curtains billowed out from open windows.

As we turned onto Main Street a block from Hershkowitz's, I saw the oak tree and the crowd. The tree was huge, the crowd was small, but the preacher under a drooping branch was giving them his all: the arm-waving, the shouts that dropped suddenly to whispers, the finger-pointing, and the burning eyes.

Harry scowled, looked meaningfully at me; then he turned

the lock on Hershkowitz's door and disappeared inside.

I listened for awhile and watched the crowd. The text was from Matthew, the preacher reassuring the on-lookers that they were of more value than many sparrows. From that came the pitch: as you have value to the Lord, you must demonstrate the value of the word of the Lord to you; as the Lord sees each sparrow fall, He will see the strength of your faith in the size of your offering. It was a good tie-in, though I didn't see many takers. What I did see was what Harry was complaining about: people crossing the street, or cutting behind the back of the tree, to avoid the preacher altogether.

I followed Harry inside the store, between shelves jammed with hinges and hacksaw blades, knobs and chains and gardening gloves.

"So?" he said as I reached the counter where he was leaning. "Did you save your soul?"

"I haven't even seen my soul in years," I said. "Are all the preachers that good?"

"That's good?"

"Terrific," I told him. "Is Lester Gull out there?"

Harry craned his neck to peer through the window. "No. The chicken, he probably knows you're in town."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Did you tell him about me?"

"I told him I was going to get someone to fix his wagon. How, I didn't tell him."

"Good, because I don't have a clue how. Listen, Harry, I'm going over to my place, and back to the city tomorrow. I'll give you a call."

"I can't wait," Harry said.

**H**arry did wait, until the next Sunday afternoon, when I came back up to Hanover with the results of my week's work. I checked out the preacher under the oak on my way into the store. He wasn't as good as the other one, but what he lacked in eloquence he made up in heat. People hurried by, avoiding his accusing eyes.

Inside the store, everything was quiet. Harry leaned disconsolately on the counter. "I called some people I know in Albany," I told him, "to discuss Heaven's Messenger. It's interesting stuff, but it doesn't do us much good."

"What good were you looking for it to do us?"

"I don't know. An outstanding bunco warrant on the Reverend Gull would have been nice."

"But no?"

"But no. The school is a legal setup, a tax-exempt nonprofit religious institution."

"But religion he doesn't teach! He teaches how to make a profit. This makes him a nonprofit?"

"Well, maybe there's something you could do with that, but it would take time to dig around and then go through channels. You'd have to complain to the attorney general, things like that."

"Time, my friend, I don't think I have. A whole season like this, I'm out of business. Where are you going?"

"To the lion's den," I said, heading for the door. "The belly of the beast. To the cedars of Lebanon, where the birds make their nests. I'm going to see the Reverend Gull."

The golden sun was getting ready to sink comfortably behind the hazy hills when I reached Heaven's Messenger. On a newly painted sign by the side of the road a dove flew out of an open Bible. The old restaurant building and the cabins wore fresh coats of green-trimmed white paint, and the front door had a shiny brass doorknob. I wondered, admiring its glow in the low sun, if it had come from Hershkowitz's.

My ring was answered by a thin, beak-nosed man whose

smile sprang to life a half second late, as though he hadn't decided whether to activate it until he saw who I was. "Welcome, my friend, welcome!" His bony hands grabbed mine, pressed and pumped. "Heaven's Messenger welcomes you. You've come for the month's session? Or perhaps the two week intensive study course? Please come in. You're the first of your class to arrive. I'm Lester, Reverend Lester Gull. You're . . . ?"

"Not here to study with you, Reverend Gull. Bill Smith. I'm a friend of Harry Hershkowitz's. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"Oh." Gull's eyes filled with sympathy. He stepped out onto the porch, shut the door behind him. "Mr. Hershkowitz. I did suggest gently to Mr. Hershkowitz that if he were to come to the Lord—"

"Harry has a Lord he's fond of, reverend. He also has a business he's been running in Hanover since before the Flood. He'd like to keep it going."

Gull shook his head sadly. "The concerns of man are so temporal, aren't they?"

"And your concerns?"

He smiled, his lips curving under the sharp point of his nose. "At Heaven's Messenger, we are concerned with souls. With preaching the word of the

Lord throughout the land. Isaiah 61:1, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the Lord hath annointed me to preach good tidings to the meek.'

"Uh-huh," I said. "Well, some of the meek aren't getting it. I've spent the week tracing some of your graduates. Four have phone-solicitation businesses—one also runs a phone sex line, by the way; two have pulpits in churches with shaky charters; and one is wanted by the Feds, something to do with mail fraud. And those are just the ones easy to trace in a short week. Not a very holy bunch, reverend."

Gull's eyes grew gently sad again. "It's tragic but true, some of my flock have strayed. It's always the way, and it causes me great pain, but I can hardly be held accountable. Genesis 4:9, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'"

"Well, I wouldn't know, but I do know you're getting rich off your brother. I checked you out, too, reverend. You're worth quite a bundle."

"Ecclesiastes 5:19, 'Every man to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him the power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God.'" He smiled benignly. I felt my blood begin

to boil. I lit a cigarette to give myself time to cool off.

"Mr. Gull, sir," I said, "I was baptized Catholic and raised Baptist. I can tell a can-rattler from a man of God; you don't even make it hard."

His face saddened. "Your lack of faith is distressing, Mr. Smith. I do think a course of Bible study here at Heaven's Messenger would do you a world of good."

"I doubt it, but I won't argue. I'm just here to ask you to move your final exams to a different place and time. Harry needs his Sunday business, and you're ruining it."

"Alas, the Bible says nothing about preaching the word at a time and place convenient for the heathen. Quite the opposite—Romans 1:15, 'So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.'"

"A block up from Harry's store is still Rome."

"Ah, yes. But that magnificent old oak is at the center of Main Street. That's the perfect spot. The Sabbath is the perfect time. A hostile shopkeeper and an indifferent crowd are excellent practice for my students. That's why they come to me; my training methods ensure their success. No, I'm sorry, I've found what I need." He gazed out over the darkening hills,

watched the red-streaked sky with a satisfied, proprietary air.

"If I have to," I said, "I'll keep digging. I'll turn up something on you that will wipe you out."

Gull smiled again. "I think not. I'm a careful man. I'm well established here and prospering. All my sessions are full; Heaven's Messenger is doing quite well. No, Mr. Smith, I believe I'm here to stay."

Gull's sharp, smug face was too much of a temptation. I had to leave or take a swing at it. Halfway down the front path I turned.

"Jeremiah," I said. Gull's eyebrows lifted. "Five: twenty-seven. 'As a cage is full of birds, so are their houses full of deceit: therefore they are become great, and waxen rich.' And check Matthew. Something about camels, needles, and rich men going to Heaven."

Gull seemed disconcerted. As I drove off, leaving him staring after me, I hoped that was true, and not just a trick of the fading light.

I went back to Pearl and Harry's, reported the results of my meeting with Gull—"He won't quit, and he won't move"—begged off dinner, and drove over to my cabin with Harry's worried look and Pearl's confident smile lingering in my

mind. "Leave the man alone," Pearl had commanded Harry. "He can't think with you hovering like a vulture." To me she'd said reassuringly, "Go home, sleep on it, tomorrow you'll have an idea."

I wasn't so sure, but I didn't have any other idea where to get an idea. At the cabin, I settled myself on the porch with a bourbon, watched the fresh spring evening. Then I went in and tried the piano. I played for awhile, Schumann and then Liszt. I played well and felt good about it, but it didn't give me any ideas. Finally I gave up, folded myself under the quilt, and went to sleep.

In the morning I didn't have any ideas, either. I took my coffee out onto the porch, watched the pale sun burn off the mist, listened to the chatter of the birds. It was a busy time, an early spring morning, birds in pairs and flocks staking out territory, grabbing up the best places to nest and feed. They hopped on branches, dived through the air, flicked to the ground. I sipped my coffee, tried to think.

A sudden screeching made me look up. Two birds, small and large, soared, swooped, hurtled through the blue of the sky. The big one, a hawk, circled, faked, and cut back, aiming for the branches of a great

ash tree. The small one, screaming and flapping, wouldn't let him near it. The battle was balletlike in elegance and dead serious in content: a mother bird protecting her young from a predator. It was over fast, and the smaller bird won. The whole thing became too much trouble for the hawk; he circled, lifted onto an air current that took him over the trees and across the valley. The mother bird disappeared into the branches of the ash.

I stared after her for a moment, then laughed. I was still laughing as I pulled the car out of the driveway, heading for Hershkowitz's.

All over the world, hardware stores open early. Even upstate, even in Hanover. It was eight thirty by the time I got there, and Harry's day was already well begun. "Okay," I said. "Time to get to work."

"One of us is already working," Harry pointed out.

"Where's your nearest lumberyard?"

"Sheppard's, off the highway. You had an idea?"

I was moving through Harry's shelves, grabbing what I'd need. "No," I said. "Divine inspiration."

I spent the rest of the morning hammering, sawing, glueing. Out on the porch of my

cabin I had quite a little assembly line going. It occurred to me halfway through that I probably could have just gone to the Agway and bought these things, but I decided I liked the personal touch better anyway. Just after three I pulled up to Hershkowitz's again, trunk and back seat crowded with the work of my hands.

I stuck my head in the hardware store door. "You have a ladder?" I called to Harry.

"This is a hardware store, I better have a ladder. How long?"

"Long."

"What are you going to do?"

"Climb the tree."

I climbed the ladder and climbed the tree, twelve times altogether because I couldn't carry much each time. Luckily I only needed to work in the lower branches; ten to twenty feet above the ground, I reasoned, was just about what this plan needed. When I was done, Harry and I stood back and admired my craftsmanship.

"This will work?" Harry asked.

"Harry," I said, "this will work. Isaiah, 31:5."

Harry gave me a sideways, appraising look. "I didn't know this about you, that you know so well the Bible."

"I looked it up."

I had dinner with Harry and Pearl, warned them it might be a week before they saw any results from my installation, maybe longer before it had the desired effect on the Reverend Gull's students. "It will take work," I warned Harry.

"I am prepared," he replied solemnly.

**T**wo Sundays later I went back up to Hanover to see how things were going.

I left at midmorning, had a leisurely drive. The Hudson flowed high in its banks, and the yellow-green of the hills had deepened to a glowing emerald. The air smelled sweet, early flowers and damp earth. By the time I got into town, it was after twelve. I parked up from Hershkowitz's, sauntered down the block, checked out the tree. Everything looked good to me.

"Hey, look who's here!" Harry greeted me as I entered the store. "Mr. Smart Person! Why didn't you tell us you were coming, Pearl would have made breakfast."

"I'm still full from last time. How's business?"

"Like the garbage man, my business is picking up. Which, by the way, is not so funny. This plan of yours makes a mess."

"You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"Don't talk about breaking eggs! I—oh oh, look at this," he interrupted himself.

I turned around to face the window, saw what he was seeing: across the street, two shiny, late-model cars had pulled up. From them, dressed in their dapper Sunday best, emerged the Reverend Lester Gull and six other men.

"Harry," I said, "I think I feel the need to hear the Word."

"Me too," said Harry.

We left the store, stood waiting as Gull and his entourage strode toward us. I lit a cigarette and smiled at Gull. He smiled back.

"Mr. Smith, isn't it? What brings you back to Hanover? Good day, Mr. Hershkowitz." He turned his smile to Harry.

"I'm like a homing pigeon, reverend," I said. "You preaching today?"

"No, no. Mr. Vogel is going to share some thoughts with us this beautiful afternoon." He turned to one of the men beside him, a short sour-faced man in a pale gray suit. "What's your text today, Al?"

"The Book of Job," the man replied, squaring his shoulders in a self-important way.

"Job," I said. "I like that. Some of my favorite verses are from Job."



"Oh? Which might those be?" Gull asked pleasantly.

"Twelve: seven," I said. "And 20:5 and 7. Those, reverend, particularly make me think of you."

Gull's face clouded. He fixed me with angry eyes; then he nodded curtly and turned his back. With a smoothly reassuring smile he said to the little man, "Whenever you're ready, Al. I know it's your first time; don't be nervous. Just preach as the spirit moves you."

Gull and his friends, Harry and I, and a few stray shoppers stood in a semicircle around the tree as the little man started his sermon.

"Must be a beginner," I whispered to Harry, watching Vogel shift uncomfortably, start in a voice too soft, lose his thread. He glanced at Gull, who smiled. That seemed to give him courage. He set his shoulders again and warmed to the full force of his argument, which was that although the purposes of the Almighty are not always apparent, nevertheless faith is required of the faithful—Harry lifted his eyebrows at that—and that support of a preacher like himself is a tangible sign of that faith.

As a pitch I'd heard better, but that wasn't why I was here. I was waiting for my reward

from Heaven, or at least from the sky.

And it came. A few minutes into his talk Vogel, without missing a beat, brushed something from his hair. A minute later, something else. Then he waved his arm to make a point, stopped horrified as a wet white lump landed on his sleeve. He twisted his head to look up into the tree just in time to catch a sunflower seed in the eye, but that was good because it made him jump back fast enough to avoid the next big white splotch headed his way.

Someone in the crowd stifled a laugh. Everyone looked up into the tree. And the tree was full of action.

All the feeders I'd built were full, overflowing with nuts, seeds, crumbled bread. Harry had been assiduous. I'd built the feeders flat, to make it easier for the birds to toss what they didn't want over the side. They were busy tossing, eating, digesting. In the next higher set of limbs were living: wrens, robins, sparrows, crows, and finches flitted, hopped in and out of birdhouses, landed on nesting platforms. Five pigeons sat cooing on a branch.

"I didn't know you had pigeons up here," I said to Harry as Vogel, out of the line of fire, frantically scraped at his sleeve with a handkerchief.

"I got everything," Harry said proudly. "But I'm telling you, cleaning up under that tree every day is a pain in the neck. Seeds and crumbs and what do you call that stuff, guano?"

"In the Bible," I said, in a voice meant to carry to where Gull and the others huddled in hasty conference, "they call it dung."

Gull spun and glared at me. "You did this!" he accused. "You did this to keep us from spreading the word of the Lord!"

"No," I said, "I did it to keep my friend Harry from going out of business. You said this was the perfect spot. I disagree. I think this spot is for the birds."

Gull paled with anger. He turned on his heel, stomped off to his car. His flock followed. They all slammed their doors as they screeched away.

"That man is not happy," Harry said.

"No."

"What if he comes back? In the middle of the night, and poisons all my birds?"

"Harry, as long as you keep those feeders full, you'll have a waiting list. If Gull poisoned all these guys at midnight, you'd have new tenants by dawn. He knows that. He won't be back."

The crowd that had gathered was dispersing, smiling and

glancing into the tree. One man asked Harry if he was open. "I just need some wing nuts," he said with a grin. "It's no big deal, but as long as I'm here."

"I better go inside," Harry said to me. "The customers might come back, now that there's nobody yelling at them. But you better come for dinner, or I'm in big trouble with Pearl."

"Sure. Thanks."

"Wait," Harry said. "Those verses from Job that you told him you like. What do they say?"

"One was for me. 'But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the birds of the air, and they shall tell thee.'"

"How about the ones you said made you think of him?"

"The triumphing of the wicked is short," I quoted to Harry, "and the joy of the hypocrite but for the moment. He shall perish forever like his own dung; they which have seen him shall say, where is he?"

Harry grinned, and I grinned. With a wave he turned back, disappeared into Hershkowitz's.

I stuck my hands in my pockets, ambled down the block, enjoying the sun and the breeze and the songs of the birds in the smalltown morning.

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# The Rolling Rock

by Geoffrey Hitchcock

**W**e squelched through the orchard and then took the path along the riverbank. I don't quite know why we did this, it would have been easier to get to Rina's by road, but we did, each of us no doubt half expecting to come across Dirk's body stuck in some willow roots or wedged behind a rock. The four of us, George and Jean, Mary and I, had been sitting in the sun on my *stoep* enjoying a prelunch sherry and discussing yesterday's party, and of course last night's storm, when the phone rang. It was Rina—had we seen Dirk this morning? She had gone home after the party, but Dirk had gone to Hansie's for a final celebratory drink and she hadn't seen him since. Had she phoned Hansie? Of course. He was still asleep when she phoned, but Lisa had told her that both the brothers had got very drunk, too drunk to drive, so Hansie had escorted Dirk as far as the bridge and then come home. I told her Dirk was probably sleeping it off in the pack shed on a bed of woodwool behind some bales. I said we would have our dinner and then come over to look for him. Mary had cooked a delicious-smelling dinner, and I wasn't going to spoil it by worrying about a drunken Dirk.

But the delectable roast lamb with roast potatoes and pumpkin, green peas, and cauliflower was slightly spoiled by Dirk. We weren't as relaxed and appreciative as we should have been. True, we talked a lot about how lucky the two Theron boys had been to inherit a mortgage-free farm each when their parents had died in a boating accident and what a good idea it was to build a bridge over the river that separated the two farms. And about how lucky it was that the terrific thunderstorm last night had held off until the bridge opening party was well and truly over. But there was a sense of urgency that made us chew our food quicker than we should have. It wasn't like dour Dirk to miss church—he was an elder and it was expected of him, and he would have routed Rina out to go with him, so it did look as if he hadn't made it home last night. Had he taken a rest in the almost dry riverbed, passed out, and been swept away by the rapidly rising water that the storm

produced? It seemed unlikely. Even if he had been drunk enough to sleep in the riverbed, surely the torrential rain, not to mention the thunder and lightning, would have wakened him in time for him to crawl out. We needed to get going and solve the mystery.

So there we were, making our way gingerly along the slippery track. Steve, my black cocker spaniel, rapidly becoming a brown dog, was leading the party, ears trailing in the mud and busy nose seeking scents with evident enjoyment, though what they would be after the rain I couldn't imagine. Mary came next and then me, Jean and George bringing up the rear. Each with our own thoughts. I was thinking about Dirk, that big, strong, bearded man who rejoiced in being an Afrikaner and who refused to speak English. He treated all new newcomers as interloping foreigners, referring to them as "the Englishman" or "the Jew" or even "the Greek" (if they happened to be Portuguese). A complete contrast to his younger brother Hans, who was twelve years his junior and who had escaped from the farm and gone to university, in Johannesburg of all places. Why couldn't he have gone to Stellenbosch and taken his degree in Afrikaans? It was beyond Dirk's comprehension, and he gave Hansie as hard a time as he could. But it didn't seem to worry Hans. He had decided that there was more to the world than the Ceres Valley and he intended at least to be aware of it. He took a degree in mechanical engineering at Wits and might never have come back, but he was presented with a farm, albeit a poor one, and he accepted the challenge of turning it into a good one with enthusiasm. In Joh'burg he had met a lovely tall blonde named Lisa who was a final year B.Sc. student, majoring in botany. They had fallen in love and married. Fortunately Lisa was not enamored of city life and looked forward to having some land to grow the plants she loved. They were a happy couple, and as Wits was my alma mater, too, we had plenty to talk about and we became close friends. Mary was fond of both Lisa and Rina. Dirk was the odd man out. And now he was missing.

We came round a curve and were in sight of the bridge. The pool where yesterday children had been happily splashing was now at least two feet deeper, but there was still a vestige of beach. It was clear from the debris on the banks that it had at one stage been nearly four feet deeper than that. Steve was running about and barking excitedly at a big rock in the pool.

"Look," said Mary, "the big rock's come adrift from the bank and rolled into the pool. Gosh, there were children climbing all over it

yesterday—somebody might have been hurt if it had come loose then.”

We all clambered down to the tiny strip of beach and examined the rock and where it had come from. It was a big, roughly spherical boulder about four feet in diameter that had been lodged in the bank for many years, three or four feet above the beach. From the top of the rock to the footpath on the top of the bank was maybe another four feet. The annual risings of the river had gradually washed away some of the clay from under it, and last night's wash must have been the last straw. Its center of gravity must have moved over the edge, the wet earth behind it had lost its grip, and away it had rolled. It hadn't rolled very far; the soft bottom of the river had stopped it only a yard or so from the water's edge.

Steve seemed to be fascinated by it. He jumped into the water and swam all round it, then came out, shook himself all over us, and sat staring at it. I waded in until the water was uncomfortably close to the top of my boots and prodded around with my stick. I felt something firm but yielding and prayed that it might be a rotted willow log. Reversing my stick, I managed to hook something up just long enough to see that it was a man's hand.

I went back to land smartly. "There is a man under that rock."

"Not possible," said George. "What combination of circumstances could result in a man being under a rock that must have come adrift at the height of the storm?"

His walking stick didn't have a crook on it, so I offered him mine but he declined. Mary and Jean thought we should try to roll the rock off the body, but George pointed out that if indeed there was a body under the rock it was a police matter and he and Jean should stand guard while Mary and I went to tell Rina and summon the police at the same time.

Mary and I climbed up the bank and set off through another orchard towards Rina's house, Mary leading. "Poor Rina," I said. "Whatever will she do without Dirk?"

"I expect she'll get used to the idea once she stops dancing for joy."

It wasn't the reply I expected. "Is that what wives do when their husbands have fatal accidents?"

"It is if their husbands happen to be chauvinist pigs who treat them like dirt and beat them when they fail to produce babies."

"That doesn't sound like Dirk. I know he is, was, a bigoted, humorless man, but as far as Rina was concerned he was a great big cuddly bear. Wasn't he?"

She slowed her step until I caught up with her, turned, and gave me one of those loving smiles that make life worthwhile. "You are the big softie. You are my three-monkeys man, you see no evil in anyone. You don't hear the gossip either, do you?"

"Country people like to gossip—I take no notice of it. I heard a rumor that Hansie was having an affair with Rina. That's ridiculous."

"Of course it's ridiculous. And malicious. And who do you think started it? None other than big brother himself."

"But why?"

"Why indeed. You didn't know Dirk very well did you?"

"No, he wasn't the sort of man you could get to know. He only liked to talk about rugby. He was a good rugby player."

"He was a hard, rough player. He was a beast. He hated Rina because she didn't produce a child and that reflected on him. There's nothing wrong with Rina, and he knew it."

Oh my God, I thought. I hadn't realized how bad things were between Dirk and Rina, but I knew he was something of a thorn in Hansie's side. Supposing . . . I must warn Mary. But that brown-haired, hazel-eyed love of my life wasn't stupid.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, "but if something happened last night, and if they were somehow caught up in it, they certainly were not guilty of murder."

"I couldn't really believe that any of the three were, but something bizarre happened last night. I certainly won't say anything to anybody that might make things look bad for Rina."

We could see her now, pottering in her garden, snipping dead-heads off roses that were still throwing a few late blooms. She looked worn out with worry, but she took the news calmly enough and I left her sitting on a garden bench with Mary and went into the house to phone. I took off my muddy boots at the back door and went first to the laundry, an enclosed piece of the back verandah, to wash the mud off my hands. There was a large dirty linen wicker basket there, and I couldn't resist lifting the lid to look in. It was full of wet, muddy clothes. Women's clothes. I wasn't surprised.

I first reported the matter to Sergeant Vermeulen of the Ceres police. There weren't a lot of police about in those days—it was a small town and the crime wave hadn't started yet. The sergeant was the man in charge, and he said he would be there himself in about fifteen minutes. Then I phoned Hansie and told him what we had found. "We don't know that it's Dirk."

"It would be real Chinaman's luck for it to be Paul Onkers," he said, naming a troublesome farm laborer. I suggested he come down on his tractor and bring some ropes to help with the removal of the rock. I also suggested he come by himself and not involve the gossiping farmhands just yet. I put my wet boots on again, left Mary to look after Rina, and made my way back to the river.

Sergeant Vermeulen arrived before I had time to quiz my friends on their thoughts. I didn't know him at all. He was overweight and looked as if he would be heavyhanded and not overanxious for work, but George, who knew him through court work, had great respect for him. He spent the time while we were waiting for Hansie examining what he laughingly called the scene of the crime. He was particularly interested in the scar left in the bank.

"You can see," he said, "that the big rock isn't properly round, so when it rolled out, it didn't roll straight into the river but off at an angle like a bowl with a big bias. Or maybe it came out straight and then keeled over on its side where its flatness stopped it rolling farther. It's hard to tell which, now the flood has washed away the marks. It doesn't matter really. Too bad, hey, somebody had to be lying just there." He spoke English with the thick, guttural accent of those who habitually spoke Afrikaans.

Then Hansie arrived in his pickup with some rope and some poles—the tractor would be no use, he said—and with these we managed to roll the rock away from the body. Not without considerable difficulty and getting ourselves thoroughly soaked in the process. Then came the grisly task of retrieving the body. We felt around with our feet, stationed one man at each corner, so to speak, and with our faces in the water lifted the limp mass. We held it for a while to let the current carry away most of the mud and then laid it on the beach ready for the arrival of Dr. Frank Masson, a G.P. who acted as police doctor should the need arise, which it rarely did.

The water had washed away any blood that might have been about, so the body wasn't too hard to look at. Nevertheless, Jean elected to wander along the path for a little way, just in time to meet Wynand du Toit, better known as Oom Wynand, as he came strolling along the path. He stopped and greeted her and surveyed the scene.

"Which one is it?" he asked, but before she could reply, "Oh, there's Hansie, so it must be Dirk."



I was standing somewhat nearer to them than the others, and I don't think any of them heard the strange remark. Certainly not Sergeant Vermeulen, who was showing concern for Hansie. Hansie was white and shivering.

"You go home, Mr. Theron. You've had a bad shock, and the cold water hasn't helped you. Go and get into a hot tub. Perhaps Mrs. Rawson would drive you? That would be better."

Jean was only too pleased to fall in with this scheme, and the two of them drove off, leaving George and me to back up the sergeant. Oom Wynand sat on a rock a little distance away and stoked his pipe. He was a delightful old character full of patience and wisdom. He had never been a rich farmer, and now he had sold most of his land to his neighbors and kept just a wedge for himself and his wife. We had seen them earlier as we came along the river, sitting on their *stoep*, and we had waved and called out a greeting. Now he sat quietly smoking until the excitement was over.

Dr. Masson arrived, and we told him what had happened.

"Apart from the bruise on the back of his head, there's not much to see," he said. "Let's turn him over."

So we rolled him over, the doctor shuddering as the shattered bones crunched.

"God, that must have been painful! But only for a millisecond, I should think. Every bone in his torso seems to be smashed. But his head has escaped. That's strange."

"I think the rock rolled alongside of him and then flipped over," said the sergeant.

I had been dreading seeing a smashed up, unrecognizable face, but it was hardly damaged. A little mud clung to Dirk's usually immaculate beard, and there was a scratch on his forehead, that's all.

There was nothing Dr. Frank could do here—he would perform an autopsy in the cottage hospital later. Sergeant Vermeulen took some photos of the body on the beach, and we loaded poor Dirk's mortal remains into the police car. The officials drove away and left George and me to meditate.

We walked back along the path to where Oom Wynand was still puffing contentedly away. George was shaking his head. "I just can't believe any of this."

"Neither can I. But Oom Wynand here wasn't all that surprised. I'm sure I heard him ask Jean which brother it was. Isn't that so?"

Wynand shrugged one of those deep shrugs of his, where his shoulders all but cover his ears, a mannerism that prefaces a deep philosophical pronouncement. George and I therefore found suitable rocks and sat down.

"I was at the party yesterday, listening to the talk, and while everybody was saying what a good idea the bridge was, I was having doubts about it."

"I thought it was a good idea—bring them closer together," said George.

Wynand nodded. "That's what most people said, but I was thinking they might be better apart. There's never been much love between those two brothers. The big one always bullied the small one. Then he had the better deal when it came to the inheritance, and to top it off, he married Hansie's schooldays sweetheart."

"He did Hansie a favor there. Lisa is much more suited to him than Rina. They have much more in common, and Lisa's knowledge of plants is a great help on their farming efforts. Rina is a sweet person, but her interests don't extend much beyond clothes and hairdos and what's known as having a good time. Things Dirk frowned on. She wasn't the type to pine for a lover who was going to be away for four years. In fact, she married Dirk only a year after Hansie left. Long before he met Lisa. I just can't believe that he can have any lingering passion for Rina. Pity, yes, but love, no. In any case, Rina would have been much too frightened of Dirk to try anything like that."

Oom Wynand nodded his head and blew out a satisfying cloud of blue smoke. "You are most probably right, but who can know the truth when it comes to affairs of the heart? There is a rumor circulating that the two are—what do they say?—having it on. Yes, that's what they say. Only the idle gossip of bored country people, of course, but it will have got to Dirk's ears. Then, when I am lying awake last night and thinking about the party and the things we have been talking about, I hear shouting and arguing and perhaps even fighting coming from down here, so when I walk along the riverbank and see a body lying on the sand, the thing that occurs to me to ask is, which one?"

"So you don't think it was an accident?"

Wynand looked startled at George's question. "It must have been an accident, Mr. Rawson, those people aren't murderers. Not a simple accident like the rock rolling down in the downpour just when Dirk happened to be walking by or was maybe standing

there in the riverbed. No, that's too much to believe, but there was some other circumstance we may never precisely know. The one thing we can be sure of is that whatever happened last night, none of the players had murder in their hearts; therefore, the rock rolling on Dirk was an accident." He paused to put another match to his pipe. "Mind you, if it had been Hansie lying under the rock, I would not have been so sure. That Dirk was a hard man—a man without compassion. The colored folk who work for him won't be shedding any tears. No, the puzzle is not whether it was an accident but how exactly such an accident happened." He stood up and stuffed his now lighted pipe in his pocket. "I must go and tell Anna all about it."

When he was out of earshot, George said, "Has the old man lost his marbles, or do you think he is talking some kind of sense?"

"There are no flies on Oom Wynand, that you can be sure of, and I don't like to think of Rina or Hansie or Lisa being murderers. In fact, I can't think of it. But there could have been an unintentional killing and perhaps an attempt at a coverup. I'll tell you one thing, Rina was out there last night in the storm—her washing basket is full of wet, muddy clothes."

"In that case she would be advised to get rid of them before Vermeulen comes snooping around."

"Why do you say that?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they've got themselves in some kind of a jam and plan to say they were all at home, safely tucked up in bed, when the storm broke. And probably that's the best thing for them to do—it will be impossible to prove otherwise. Unless they leave incriminating bits of evidence around."

"You do surprise me! I never thought of you as a conspirator trying to defeat the ends of justice."

"It's nothing to do with me, they're your friends. If I do get dragged into it, it will be as counsel for the defense, and it will be simpler for me if they don't do anything too silly."

I thought about this for a few seconds, then said, "I'm with you. And I'm cold and wet. And so are you."

We set off for home at a fast trot and were soon warming up with hot showers and small whiskies. I got into warm clothes and set off in my pickup to fetch the girls. George would have to stay and dry his clothes, as nothing of mine, apart from a dressing gown, would fit him.

I drove first to Dirk's—I mean Rina's—and found the ladies inside, very subdued and sipping tea. Rina was looking terrible and I thought in no state to be left on her own; she should come and stay with us at least for the night. But she and Mary had been through that exercise, and Rina was staying. So I said I would get in touch with Gert, the farm foreman, and tell him to take over the running of the farm in the meantime, which at this time of year he was more or less doing anyway. Then after more protestations that she would be all right and just wanted to be alone for a while and try to sleep, we started to move out.

"At least let us take your dirty laundry away with us and let Mary deal with it."

Her eyes widened, and she went just a shade paler. "But why . . ."

"Just a precaution. Sergeant Vermeulen is very likely to pay you a routine visit, either later today or tomorrow morning, and it would be a pity if he found anything that might give him wrong ideas about where you were last night."

We were at the back door, and before she could say anything, I nipped into the laundry and grabbed the wet clothes from the basket.

I explained the reason behind my action to a mystified Mary as we drove to collect Jean. At Hansie's it was much the same as it had been at Rina's except that there were the two of them to sustain each other so there was no problem about leaving them. But I had to know whether they too had any wet and dirty clothes to take care of. When I managed to draw Hansie away from the others, he preempted me.

"Bill, this is a terrible business; what am I going to do? Everybody will be saying I did for Dirk because of what they seem to think was going on between me and Rina. The police will be coming and asking all sorts of questions, and I won't know what to say. I can't pretend that things were ever good between me and Dirk, everybody knows that."

"Look, Hansie, I want to help you all I can, but I think at this stage the less I know about what happened last night the better. George thinks the less anybody knows the better. It was an accident, right? None of you three were there after you had your fight with Dirk—Wynand heard a squabble down there when you were seeing Dirk home. But after that, nobody has reason to believe any of you were not safely home in your beds. Unless you leave evidence to the contrary lying about."

"What do you mean?"

I told him about Rina's basket of wet clothes, and he said yes, they had a wet clothes problem, too, but they had put theirs in a fertilizer sack and stowed it at the back of the garage.

"If Vermeulen were to come across it, he'd never believe anything else you tried to tell him. Better let me take it, too. And don't try to explain—yet."

We went to the garage, and I saw where they had hidden the sack behind some empty cartons at the back. Oh, Hansie, I thought, you'll have to read a lot more whodunits before you embark on your next criminal enterprise.

We took the short way home, which was along the new connecting road over the new bridge. Just over the bridge I stopped the pickup and surveyed the scene. There was an old fence standard stuck in the ground almost in the riverbed. A relic of some long gone fenceline. You know what they're like—like a very small railway line. Only yesterday I had tried to get it out to fix Mary's sweetpea fence, but it was stuck fast in the clay. Now, when I went down the bank and wobbled it about a bit, it came out easily. I wasn't surprised.

"Just what I need to fix your sweetpea fence."

"You can't just take other people's property," said Mary. "Put it back."

I didn't put it back, I took it home and drove it in next to the rotted support and tied the fence to it. Then I made sure the fruit drying trays had been stacked for the night, and by the time I got back to the house, the sun had set and wisps of cloud were spilling over the mountains.

Inside all was bright and cheerful. I could hear the washing machine doing its stuff in the background. No doubt George would take the clean, damp clothes home and put them through his drier. The main thing was that nobody should see them hanging on a line anywhere. George had made himself useful by getting a good blaze going in the hearth and making a big pot of coffee, and we were soon sitting around with mugs of coffee well laced with brandy. And then the speculations began in earnest. All sorts of suggestions were put forward as to what had happened last night, and the more brandy we drank, the more bizarre they became. "They" had decided they had had enough of Dirk and had got together and waylaid him somewhere, killed him with a blow to the head with a rock, and dragged him down to the river and rolled

the rock on him to make it look like an accident. Of course none of us believed this—we were just looking for the most dastardly scenario we could think of. But it did seem to me that there was a vestige of truth in the idea. Suppose Dirk had attacked Rina, but Rina had somehow managed to hit him with a rock down there by the river, and Hansie and Lisa had happened along, finding Rina in a state because of what would become of her. Lisa had then maybe had the idea of staging an accident to cover Dirk's injuries, and they had between them managed to wrestle the standard free and use it to loosen the rock. This, I suppose, was semi-plausible at best and was full of holes that would need to be plugged before it would hold any water. For example, why should Lisa and Hansie happen along? But they had been out in the storm, and so had Rina. It was too difficult to imagine, so when George suggested that we give up that line of research and work on the scene where they were all safely tucked up as they were no doubt going to maintain, we jumped at the idea and started putting up idiotic ideas such as Dirk's taking a nap in the riverbed, being wakened by the downpour and the thunder but being too slow to get out of the way when the rock rolled.

As the evening wore on with breaks to attend the washing machine—it was an old fashioned twin tub job—and to fry up some bacon and eggs and make some salads and so forth, we finally settled on what we thought would be the most plausible scenario. Dirk staggers off after Hansie had maybe hit him and stumbles or falls down the bank and into the pool, where he splashes about trying to sober himself up. Then he climbs the bank alongside the rock but no sooner has he got to the path than he trips and falls four feet onto the rock. His two hundred seventy pounds jolt it loose, and he continues his journey backwards, landing in the riverbed and banging his head on a stone and maybe hurting himself in other places. He turns over and starts to crawl out, but the rock gets him. We were satisfied with that. It wasn't true, but it was an explanation that would satisfy the majority that, however strange it seemed, the "accident" was possible. Now all we had to do was wait and see what the coroner made of it all.

**T**he inquest took place in the courthouse on the Tuesday afternoon following the accident. The magistrate who sat in as coroner did a very professional job, considering he was only a jumped up J.P. He had been well briefed by Piet

van Vliet, George's partner (who had no doubt been briefed by George), and carried out the procedure to everyone's satisfaction. He began with George and me, who explained the finding of the body, including Rina's phone call in the morning.

Rina was next, and he gave her quite a rough time on the subject of her not noticing her husband's absence earlier. This brought out the embarrassing fact that they occupied separate bedrooms and that it was not a happy marriage and that her husband treated her badly because, she thought, she had failed to give him a child. She also told the coroner that she had looked into her husband's bedroom as soon as she had risen and the bed appeared to have been slept in, so she had assumed he was somewhere on the farm. Her maid, one Sabina Ambraal, told her, however, that because of all the preparations for the bridge party she hadn't found time to make the bed on the Saturday morning.

Then it was Hansie's turn as the last person to see Dirk alive. Hansie admitted that he and his brother hadn't been on very good terms. Hansie resented being always treated like a small boy, being patronized and told what to do. And on that night of all nights, when they should have forgotten their differences, they had both drunk too much, and the tensions between them had increased. At the end of the evening Dirk was very drunk, and he, Hansie, who wasn't quite so bad, decided he had better walk his brother home because neither of them was in a fit state to drive. They argued all the way, and by the time they got to the new bridge, a real slanging match had developed. At the coroner's insistence Hansie admitted that it was because Dirk was accusing him of having an affair with his wife, which was quite untrue and damaging to his own marriage. Dirk had aimed a blow at him, which he managed to avoid, but he was frightened because his brother was eight inches taller than he and twice his weight. He stooped and picked up a stone to defend himself, an act that infuriated Dirk, who bent to get a stone for himself. This brought his head down, and Hansie had hit him on the back of the head. Not hard enough to knock him out but enough to send him reeling across the bridge, and Hansie had, frankly, fled. A few minutes later he heard Dirk splashing about in the shallow pool and had thought, good, no harm done and the cold water will sober him up. He was very contrite and wanted to take the blame for the accident. I shouldn't have left him to make his own way home. I could at least have



stayed nearby in case he got himself into difficulties. The coroner told him not to blame himself.

Lisa made a brief appearance to confirm that her husband and brother-in-law had gone off together about one A.M. She had gone straight to bed. She was disgusted with the men's drunken behavior, and when her husband had returned at about half past one and told her what had happened, she had merely remarked that she wished that they had both fallen off the bridge.

The police evidence consisted of the sergeant's description of how he had been called to the scene and how he had helped to remove a large boulder that was lying on the body and how, after a brief examination by Dr. Masson, he had delivered the body to the hospital. He produced his photographs of the site and the body for the coroner's scrutiny. He further stated that there were no signs of a struggle but pointed out that an exceptionally heavy storm had struck somewhere about two A.M., causing the river to rise and obliterate any footprints that might have existed. He told how he had later returned to the farms and questioned Mrs. Rina Theron and Mr. and Mrs. Johannes Theron as to their whereabouts on the fatal night. He had also questioned the farm staffs without learning anything that pointed to anything other than an accident. The coroner thanked him and complimented him on his thoroughness. And I suppose, apart from not spotting the wet clothes and the loose fence post, there wasn't much else he could have done.

Dr. Masson stated that he had carried out an autopsy and that in his opinion death had resulted from the horrendous injuries that occurred when the victim had been crushed under a very big boulder. Questioned about the possibility of death's having occurred before the man had been crushed, he said that he thought that unlikely. There had been a blow to the back of the head that he considered not serious enough to have caused concussion and certainly not death. Death had not been caused by drowning, by heart attack, or by stroke. Blood alcohol level had been extremely high, and he went on to speculate that Dirk had probably stumbled from the track and fallen heavily onto the boulder and from there onto the dry bed or into very shallow water, almost certainly injuring himself severely. Then, before he could crawl away, the rock, loosened by his fall, had rolled on him.

The coroner was quick to point out that this was pure speculation and could not be considered as evidence. For myself, I was delighted that Frank Masson had come up with the same scenario that we

had invented. I suspected that George had had something to do with it, but he swore blind that he hadn't. I felt that the doctor's (misinformed) speculation would set at rest the minds of the many who probably could not bring themselves to believe that such an accident could happen.

The coroner then inquired if anybody in the court had anything to add that would help him with his verdict, but there were no takers. Oom Wynand knew when to hold his peace. The coroner then spoke at some length about the events leading up to the tragedy and expressed his sympathy to the family of the deceased. He said he could find no evidence to suggest foul play and brought in a verdict of death by misadventure resulting from overconsumption of strong drink. And that was that and it was only four thirty.

I felt pleased for my friends but uncomfortable in myself. The sergeant had done all he could—the only mistake he had made was not to return to the farms before I removed what incriminating evidence there was. I suppose deep down I had hoped for detectives and forensic experts and all the things you read about, but Vermeulen couldn't possibly have called in the C.I.D. from Cape Town on the evidence he had. No, if there had been a miscarriage of justice, it rested squarely on my shoulders. I couldn't believe any of them would do anything bad under normal circumstances, but how can anyone know how another will act under stress? I couldn't get rid of the feeling that one of them or all of them had killed Dirk, maybe unintentionally, and that they had rolled the rock to hide the evidence. I felt sure the fencepost had been used to lever the rock loose and all the rain had done was wash away the marks.

The funeral the following Thursday went off according to tradition. The predikant mouthed the usual words about the Lord moving in mysterious ways and managed to put in some strong words on the subject of intemperance. The eulogy was spoken by Andries du Plessis, who said a lot of nice things about his fellow elder and a lot more about his prowess on the rugby field, where he was going to be most missed. (He kept quiet on the subject of wife and laborer bashing.) Then it was dust to dust in the pleasant little village cemetery, and the considerable crowd of mourners made its way to Rina's. She and Lisa had organized an enormous spread of sandwiches and all the traditional cakes. There were urns of tea and coffee and, for those brave enough to partake after the predikant's sermon, there was wine, beer, and brandy.

Like all funerals, it was both a sad occasion and a chance for old friends and relatives, some from afar, to get together. I was introduced to many aunts, uncles, and cousins as "my good friend and neighbor," which, under the circumstances, I thought a fair description. George and I and our wives wandered among the mourners, chatting idly but all the time on the lookout for the slightest sign of dissension on the coroner's verdict or any sign of a smear campaign starting. Only Oom Wynand said anything and that was to remark that it had been a good decision.

It was when the party was over and Mary and I were making our way out, expressing our sympathy in the usual manner and asking if there was anything we could do to help, that Hansie said, "Yes, there is—quite a big thing—I want to tell you about what really happened. I know you don't think the coroner got it right, and though you don't want to believe that any of your friends could commit a terrible crime, you can't be comfortable with Dr. Frank's scenario, knowing, as you do, that we were all out there in the rain." I gave an uncomfortable little nod. "Then come round to my place tonight, bring George and Jean, and we'll try to put your doubts at rest."

**W**hen we, all seven of us, were comfortably seated around a very pleasant fire in Hansie and Lisa's big living room, holding steaming mugs of Irish coffee, Hansie began.

"We will tell you the story of that dreadful night, and if you don't believe it, you will understand why we didn't tell it in court and told so many lies instead. When Lisa finally managed to kick Dirk out, he was so drunk that I went with him to make sure he got safely off my property. I was very drunk, too, but I was happy drunk and he was mad drunk. By the time we got to the bridge, I realized that he was murderous drunk, and I was scared. I didn't want to get in a fight with him—I wouldn't stand a chance. He kept saying he knew I was having an affair with his wife and if he ever caught me around there he would murder me. His language was foul so I started to edge away, but he had decided he would do for me right there and then. He took a vicious swing at me, but I saw it coming and dodged. The momentum of the intended blow swung him round so his back was towards me, and I aimed a kick at him. He doubled up with pain and went staggering across the bridge, and I turned and ran, flinging taunts over my shoulder as

I went. I shouted to him to cool off before he went home—I guess I was sort of drunkenly excited at getting the better of him.”

“Nobody ever died from a kick in the balls,” said George. “Why did you say you had hit him with a stone?”

“Ah well, I didn’t know what the doctor would make of the bruise on the back of his head.”

Of course this didn’t satisfy George, but he let it go and Hansie went on.

“A hundred or so yards on, I stopped to see if he would come after me. Then I heard him splashing about in the water and thought the silly so-and-so had fallen down the bank—but good, the cold water will help sober him up.

“Lisa was still in the kitchen finishing up when I got home. I told her what had happened, and she said, serve the brute right. She had started up the stairs to bed when a thought struck her: what if he drowns? They’ll accuse you of murder! Why should he drown, I asked; the water’s not two feet deep in the pool and only a trickle elsewhere. She started up again and then came back. What if he doesn’t drown? He’ll go home and murder Rina. We’ve got to go and stop him. Normally I would have scoffed at the idea, but I had seen the murderous mood he was in. I told her to put on her boots and coat, as it was going to rain. I got mine, too, and headed for the pickup. I took a three foot length of three by two that was lying near the garage.

“We drove quietly down the road as far as the branch to the bridge; then we stopped and listened. It was a weird night. The moon was about three quarters full and nearly overhead, very bright and casting dark shadows. To the west the clouds were piling and already reaching nearly to the moon, and there were distant flickers of lightning. The atmosphere was electric, ominous. We left the pickup and walked softly, arm in arm, clinging to each other.

“We both heard it at the same time—a grunting, groaning, cussing kind of sound like two sumo wrestlers struggling. It must have been Dirk, but what could he be doing? Terrible thoughts came into our heads, and we began to move faster. Suddenly there was a cry of triumph, and we began to run. When we got to the bridge, we stopped and hid behind some bushes. Dirk was standing alone, brandishing a fence standard he had wrestled from the clay. He hefted it like an assegai and started forward purposefully. I let go of Lisa and started after him.”

"But I grabbed him and pulled him back," Lisa took up the tale. " 'Don't be a fool,' I whispered, 'he'll kill you with that thing, that bit of wood won't help you. Rina's not in danger yet—we can follow when he starts off for the house.' "

But he hadn't started for the house; instead, he had taken his weapon to the rock and set about loosening it, scraping earth from under it, levering it away from the bank. The two watched him, fascinated, trying to imagine what was in his mind. After what seemed hours, but was probably about ten minutes, he had the boulder loose—so loose that he could rock it to and fro. It was a wonder it didn't roll on him. All this was easy to see in the bright moonlight, though wisps of cloud were now scudding across the moon, dimming it but not blotting out the light.

"He stood back," Hansie said, "and admired his handiwork. It was clear from his stance that he was pleased with himself. Then, the fence stake still in his hand, he started up the bank. We started to move, but he stopped dead still for a moment as if he had seen something unexpected. He put the stake down quietly and, very stealthily, made his way back to the riverbed and lay face down like a drowned man, one arm spread out to the side and his feet in the water. We should have moved then, but we were rooted to the spot, not knowing what was going on. . . ."

Rina took up the tale. "They were worried about me, and I was worried about me, too. When all the guests had gone and the servants had cleared up, Hansie invited us to go to his place, but I was scared. I knew that if I went home with Dirk he would beat me up. So I said I was too tired and drove home in the car. I locked my bedroom door and went to bed, hoping he would be sober and in a better mood in the morning. I knew Dirk wanted to get rid of me, and I'd have gone willingly enough, but he wanted to discredit me and that's why he had started the malicious rumor about Hansie and me. I think he had really come to believe it himself, though I'm sure it was his own invention. It was deadly quiet, and I lay there listening. Sometime after one o'clock I thought I heard voices in the distance. I got up and opened the window and could hear raised voices coming from the direction of the new bridge. It was too far for me to distinguish words, but I was sure Dirk and Hansie were quarreling."

"You recognized the voices?" I asked.

"I think it was probably too far away for me to be sure—I suppose it could have been two farm laborers, but I never thought about

it, I just assumed it must be the two brothers. The shouting went on for what seemed several minutes, and then quite suddenly it stopped. Oh my God, I thought, he's killed Hansie, and now he'll come and kill me. The locked door seemed frail—one kick of his great boot and he'd be in. I started to barricade the door with a chair, and then I noticed the window. The only thing to do was to get out. Stop panicking, I told myself, it will take at least ten minutes for him to get here. I knew it would be cold out there, so I took enough time to dress warmly in trousers, jersey, and my warm parka. I found my torch and went out the front door.

"The first thing that struck me was how light it was. The moon was not far from full and over halfway up the sky. He'll see me from a mile away, I thought. I hurried through the garden, keeping to the shadows whenever I could, and then into the orchard, but it didn't provide much cover with its nearly leafless trees. I dodged from one to the other as quietly as I could and prayed that he wouldn't see me. I don't know what plan I had in mind; I obviously wasn't thinking clearly. I should have been heading for your place, Mary, but I suppose some instinct told me to keep our troubles in the family, so I was heading for Lisa and Hansie. Suddenly I was out of the orchard and almost at the bridge. I ducked behind a bush and listened. Not a sound. I crept out from my cover and prepared to make a run for it, over the bridge and up the road to safety. I willed my trembling legs to do it.

"And then I saw it. A body lying face down in the riverbed, half in the water. I wanted to cry out and scramble down to it, but my fear prevented me. The moon was still bright, though clouds had begun blowing across it. I could see from the size of him and the thick black hair that it was Dirk. Perhaps at that point I should have run for it, but I couldn't bring myself to just leave him lying there. I slithered down the bank. 'Dirk?' I whispered. 'Dirk?' I took a step towards him, and then some instinct made me stop. I saw a river-rounded stone a little bigger than an ostrich egg lying at my feet. I stooped and picked it up. I moved a step nearer. He gave a pitiful moan. Another step. 'Dirk, what happened? Are you hurt?' He groaned again. I moved right up to him. 'Dirk, are you all right?'

"And then he spoke, his voice cold and menacing. 'I saw you sneaking out of the house to go to your lover, you scheming bitch. I knew you would come this way, so I laid this little trap for you. Now I'm going to kill you and leave you here on the sand while I

find your randy boyfriend, and then the two of you will lie here, and the big rock will roll over you, and the world will know that it was God's just retribution.' While he was saying this, his hand shot out and grabbed me by the ankle in a bone-crushing grip. There was no time to argue; I brought the stone down hard on the back of his head. His face dropped back onto the sand, and his grip relaxed. I turned and ran and tried to scramble back to the track, but my legs gave way. Then there were comforting arms about me."

She was sobbing quietly, and Mary went and knelt before her, taking her hands. "You poor, poor child, but there's nothing to fear now. It's all over now." Rina wiped her eyes and managed a faint smile.

"Yes, it's over now except for the nightmares."

"They will pass," said Jean. Rina nodded.

Hansie took up the tale.

"As soon as we saw Rina go toward Dirk, we started to move. Please don't ask me why we didn't cry out—I've been asking myself why ever since. We might have prevented a tragedy if we had. There was such a conspiratorial air about that it didn't occur to us. We didn't have much more than a hundred yards to go, and we set off at as good a pace as we could, me grasping my three by two in one hand and steadying Lisa with the other. But everything happened so quickly we got to the bottom of the bank only just in time to catch Rina. She was in a terrible state, screaming that she had killed Dirk, and nothing we could say would comfort her. The only thing to do was to hold her until she calmed down. I was conscious of Dirk lying there dangerously close to the loosened rock, but comforting Rina seemed to be of prime importance. Then everything happened at once. The moon finally went out for good, leaving us in total darkness, and the rain began to fall in great stinging drops. Thunder rolled in the hills quite near us, and suddenly there was one hell of a lightning strike on the mountainside just behind my farm. The thunderclap that followed was like nemesis. It shook the ground, and in the light of another strike I saw Dirk try to struggle up and the great rock start to roll."

There was a stunned silence, all of us too shocked to speak. We just stared at Hansie, openmouthed.

Hansie went on. "You are shocked, aren't you? Can you imagine what it was like for us? You don't want to believe it, and you don't have to. We didn't want to believe it, but we had no choice. I left Rina in Lisa's care and made my way to the rock, using a torch



that made little impression in the teeming rain. But it showed enough for me to see that it seemed to have done a crooked roll and was sitting squarely on poor Dirk. Only his head protruded and his lower legs and one arm. I felt for his pulse, but there was none, thank heaven.

"There was nothing I could do besides get the girls home as quick as I could. As I made my way towards them, I tripped over the fencing stake. I wasn't thinking very clearly, but I felt its presence there could be misconstrued, so I picked it up and managed to find the hole where it had come from and put it back. Then we got Rina up the bank, and I fetched the pickup and drove her home. While Lisa was getting Rina's wet clothes off, I went to the phone to ring the police. I wondered if there would be anyone on duty. Then I thought, even if there is, it's one hell of a night to bring anybody out, and what could they possibly achieve? So I didn't ring. Instead I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on and made a big pot of strong tea. Lisa got Rina into a hot bath—the poor kid was in a state of shock and shivering. Eventually we had her tucked up in bed with a big mug of hot sweet tea, and by then I'd had time to think. I thought, this thing is so bizarre that there's a good chance nobody will believe us, and if they don't believe us, we will be charged with murder and very likely convicted. On the other hand, if we simply said that I had seen Dirk to the bridge and had a bit of a fight—somebody, Wynand at least, might have heard us—nobody could prove that we weren't all safely tucked up in bed. So we decided we would all stick to that story. The rest you know."

"You got away with it," said lawyer George, "and I was sure you would, precisely because there was no evidence that you hadn't all been in bed as you said. There was, of course, equally no evidence that you had been—Rina had no alibi, and a husband and wife alibiing each other doesn't hold much water. But it was heard in a little country court where villainy is not the order of the day. And I must say you put on a very good act! You took a chance, though, by leaving wet clothes around. You have Bill to thank for getting rid of that bit of evidence."

"On George's advice," I said.

"Legally speaking," said George, "the case is closed, so now that you have put us fully in the picture and set our minds at rest, let's leave it at that."

"Oh no!" said Mary. "How can we just leave it at that? Our dear friends have been through hell, suffered terribly, and we say you got away with it—good for you! I want you to know that we all love you, and that includes my amateur detective husband, who tried to put all sorts of terrible ideas into our heads. And that, though we knew there was more to it than came out at the inquest, we never doubted for an instant that you were innocent of any crime. Though I'm not sure that the aforesaid husband can be included in this."

But even as she said it she was giving me one of her loving smiles. She knew it had been harder for me to keep faith because my engineering training had taught me to rely on logical thinking rather than blind faith or intuition.

Lisa came to my rescue. "That's not quite fair, Mary; Bill was the one who covered up our mistakes for us, took our dirty wet clothes away before the sergeant could find them and get the wrong, I mean right, idea. So it's to Bill more than anybody that we owe lifelong gratitude."

"Really it's to George, who staked his reputation and risked being struck off the rolls by advising me to do the dirty work."

"That's correct," said George in his best yes-your-worship fashion. And then with a smile, "Though I doubt if doing some washing for a neighbor in distress could be considered a crime."

"The certain thing is this—we all owe you an eternal debt of gratitude," said Hansie. "You have no idea how much more confidence we had going into the inquest, knowing that the good sergeant wouldn't be springing our dirty linen on us. The thing that worries me, Bill, is this: what made your nasty, suspicious mind—correction, your alert, inquiring mind—send you rooting in Rina's washing basket?"

"Just that—my alert, inquiring mind. When we first saw the rock lying in the river, I wondered why. Everybody else was quite happy to believe the rain had brought it down, and sure, there had been a flood and the water had been lapping the rock and no doubt eroding a little of the supporting earth away. But that earth is hard, impervious clay, and the water would have lapped the rock for only a little while. Still, there has to be the point of overbalance somewhere. Then I saw something that startled me and sent me prodding around in the water with my walking stick. There was a fence standard some twenty or so yards upstream from the rock. It had been there more or less forever, and at one time it supported

a fence running north and south. Now it seemed to me it would be for an east-west fence. You may think that pretty sharp of me, but I'd been looking out for such a stake and while I was at the party I had tried to see if it would come out easily. It certainly would not, it would have needed somebody much stronger than I to shift it. Yet here was the afternoon sun showing up the holes in the web. So I looked in Rina's basket, found wet clothes, and put two and two together. And made five! Sergeant Vermeulen moved about the scene of the crime, as he called it, and took lots of snapshots but not one of the pole, so I felt it safe to assume he hadn't even noticed it was there. I thought I'd pinch it before it set in the ground again and before it might arouse his interest. Nobody will find it now—it's holding up Mary's sweetpea fence that fell down the day of the party. I don't suppose you want it back, do you?"

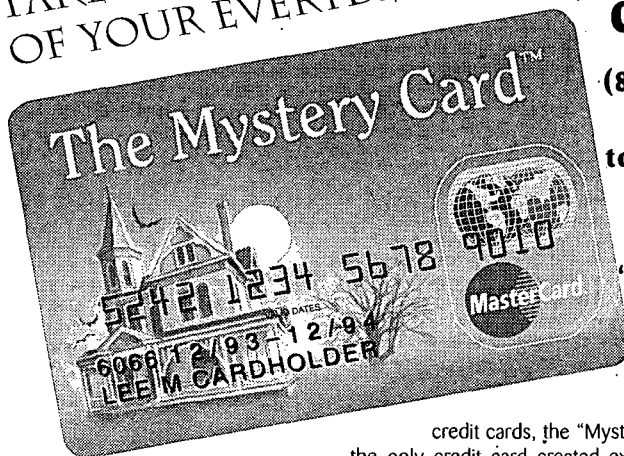
"Hell, no. I don't even want to think about it!" Hansie looked at me and shook his head, "It's going to be the devil having you for a neighbor, Bill; if I should ever decide to embark on a life of crime."

"Don't worry, old man—I'll probably catch you out, but George will be sure to get you off."

And so we left after a lot of hugging and kissing and protestations of lifelong friendship.

And now, three years on, nobody talks about that terrible night. I suppose it's best forgotten, but I can't help thinking of poor Dirk, who got so little sympathy. What a tormented soul he must have been—insanely jealous of his pipsqueak brother who failed at nothing while he, Dirk, a real man, was unable to father a child. And at Hansie's, after the bridge party, did it leak out that Lisa was pregnant? Was that the last straw that drove him to madness?

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# A Worthless Old Man

by Brenda Melton Burnham

I do not make a habit of entertaining guests at six forty-two in the morning, but the knock at the back door was demanding, peremptory. When I opened it, a big black man wearing faded army fatigues stared through the screen.

"Scrapper, what is it?"

He thrust a piece of paper at me; a two-week-old inside page of the *Golden City Courier*, folded into permanent creases. I opened it and read the short article circled in ink: "Man Found Shot."

"The body of an elderly man was discovered this morning in Cascadia Park by an early jogger. Police have identified the victim as Rudolph William Gateley, 72. He had been shot twice in the upper abdomen. Police are investigating."

I finished reading and looked up at my caller.

"He was my friend," Scrapper said.

"You'd better come in and have some coffee."

Scrapper lives in the garage on my Aunt Lottie's property. His appearance is disreputable,

his livelihood nil, and his demeanor unsettling. But he had been a great help to me a few months ago when my aunt was ill.

Needless to say, I did some checking on him at the time. Betty, who cleaned this house for my mother and was still cleaning it for me, summed things up best. "He was always a little strange, and after he come back from Vietnam, things got worse. Didn't like bein' around people, you know? Made him real nervous. Couldn't hold a regular job. His momma frets about him, but he's a good boy really. Just not like ever'body else."

I don't mind people who are not like everybody else.

Scrapper poured himself a cup of coffee and leaned against the countertop.

"What is it you want?"

"Nobody cares what happened to an old black man."

I made a dismissing gesture, which he ignored. "You're accusing the police department of not doing its best?"

He shrugged.

"What about his family? I'm sure the officer in charge has been in touch with them."

"Didn't have no family."

"What makes you think I can do something about it?"

He blew on his coffee and took a sip. Communication is not one of his skills.

"What makes you think I will do something about it? I don't believe in 'causes,' you know. Why don't you gather some friends and march on City Hall. Isn't that the way it's done these days?"

He didn't even glance my way. We drank our coffee in silence.

"All right. I'll call Chief Wilkerson and see what I can find out."

He nodded.

"I can't do it now. He won't be in his office for a couple of hours at least."

Scrapper finished his coffee, rinsed the cup, and set it on the rubber mat to dry. "I'll come back at ten," he said.

"Miss Cavanaugh," Chief Wilkerson's jovial voice boomed. "What can I do for you?" The Cavanaugh name counts for something in Kern County. Always has, always will.

"I was wondering how the investigation of the Gateley murder was coming along."

"Gateley . . . Gateley . . . ?"

"The old man who was shot in Cascadia Park."

"Ah yes, certainly. I don't know if you realize it, ma'am, but that park has fallen into disrepute these last few years. Not like it used to be when we were young." What a ridiculous remark. Everyone knows that I was born following the 1929 crash and one week after my father hanged himself. Chief Wilkerson was a World War II baby. "I wouldn't be going around there if I was you, Miss Cavanaugh."

"I wasn't planning to 'go around there.' I was asking about Mr. Gateley."

"I'm just saying robberies aren't uncommon in that section of town. Even shootings. Golden City may not be a big metropolis like Kansas City or Tulsa, but we have a lot of the same problems."

"And a murder in this area wouldn't carry as high a priority as some others?"

"Now I didn't say that, ma'am. Um, I didn't get what your interest was in the case?"

"I want a murderer caught, chief. I'm a citizen. I worry."

"No need to worry, Miss Cavanaugh. Our police force is very capable." He paused. "You haven't been threatened in any way, have you?"

"No, I have not. I have to question whether the police force is more capable for some citizens than it is for others, however."

"What are you trying to say, ma'am?"

"I'm saying that I wonder if you'd care more about Mr. Gateley's death if he'd been white, and a bank president." I could hear the chair squeak in the background as his feet came off the desk and dropped onto the floor.

"The investigating officer will be reporting to me shortly, and I can assure you the Gateley case is as important to me as every other case. It's very difficult, you know. We have no leads, there are drugs everywhere, kids carrying weapons..."

"Do you suspect drugs in this instance? Or kids?"

"I, I'm going to have to go now, Miss Cavanaugh. I've got a call on another line. Feel free to check back with me anytime." There was a click and then the dial tone.

Scrapper was quite right to come to me.

"I'm sure they'll be taking a harder look at the case," I assured him when he arrived promptly at ten. "I spoke quite harshly to Chief Wilkerson."

He stood in the middle of my kitchen, his arms at his sides.

It really does annoy me when someone doesn't carry his end of a conversation.

"It's possible some young hoodlum killed your friend for a few dollars," I continued. "Or he got into a disagreement of some type. Who knows what."

"A white man killed him."

"You don't know that."

"I been checkin'. Asked all round in the right neighborhoods, if you take my meanin'. Let folks know I wanted answers. Wasn't no black man killed Rudy. I'd aheard somethin' about it by now."

It was my turn to look skeptical.

Scrapper dropped out of his erect stance and leaned against the pantry door, staring at my extremely clean floor as if searching for a dirt speck. "The word is Rudy was hittin' folks up for money. He did gardening and odd jobs for people and he... heard things. Then he'd go to these people and ask for money. Not much, you understand, but somethin'."

"The man was a black-mailer?"

"I didn't say he was honest. I said he was my friend." He looked straight at me while he said this. He did not mention what he had done for my aunt. For me. He did not say, "You owe me"—which, of course,



would not have made any difference.

I consider myself a reasonable woman, however, and I try to help out where I can. "Very well. I assume, since you've already gone to some lengths to investigate the situation, that you are now going to tell me the names of some of these people and you want me to find out what I can about them?"

Scrapper gave me two names, Thomas Scaletti and Bruce Winston, and said he would be getting more.

Thomas Scaletti was the biggest contractor in town and had recently completed a new development. Bruce Winston was a county judge known for his charitable work. Both men belonged to all the right clubs and were active in civic organizations.

"You realize whom you're accusing?" I asked.

"I'm not accusing nobody. Rudy mentioned those names, that's all."

"Are you sure he didn't mention the president? Or the pope?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm pretty sure."

I dropped by to visit with my sister-in-law Flora that afternoon. She has her ear to the hotline of Golden City gossip,

and I rely on her frequently when I require information.

"Do have some more of that lemon bread, Jane," she insisted. "I just made it. Did you hear about Mavis Turneau?"

I ate lemon bread and listened. When Flora paused for more coffee, I said, "How are the new Scaletti houses selling, have you heard?"

"Well, the real estate market is down, you know. That's what Harry says anyway. You know what I think, though? I think people aren't buying Tom's houses because of the way he treated Harriet."

"Oh?"

"Oh yes. He left her. Just walked out of the house and left. For some girl in her twenties. A beauty operator, can you imagine? She does Ethyl Berwin's hair, and Ethyl says she's real good, but still . . . and Tom a man in his forties, old enough to know better. 'Course, he's been fooling around for years."

"So it wasn't a recent thing?"

"Well, the beauty operator is new. But she won't last. He's always been a chaser."

We both shook our heads over the foolishness of men. And some women.

"I haven't seen Gracie Winston lately, either."

"They went to Tucson for the winter, that's why you haven't seen her. They just got back,

and she looks like a million dollars. Louella says it's because Gracie went to one of those fat farms while they were out there. Says she bets next year Gracie will come back with a new face." Flora took another slice of lemon bread. "I'd be afraid of plastic surgery myself. They say it only lasts a few years and then you have to do it all over again."

"Bruce was in your class at school, wasn't he?" I said, directing my question to my brother Harry, who had come in while Flora was speaking. After my father died, my mother, herself a Cavanaugh, waited a proper period, then married my Uncle William and had my three brothers, Harry, Arthur, and Vincent.

Harry nodded. "Always was sharp, even back then. Everybody knew he was a go-getter."

We chatted for a while longer, but nothing else came to light. Flora and Harry walked with me to my car.

"What do you think of my roses, Jane?" Flora asked as we went down the steps. "Aren't they lovely? That new gardener Harry hired was really doing wonders for them. Too bad somebody had to shoot him."

Harry's mouth set in a grim line, and he said nothing.

I ate my dinner and watched the news that night just as I al-

ways do. But my mind was on other things. Tom Scaletti was in the midst of a messy divorce, Gracie Winston might have visited a health ranch.

And Rudy Gateley had worked for my brother.

It probably meant nothing. Cavanaugh men are known for their conservative politics, their gift for mediocrity, and their penchant for hunting small animals that can't fight back. They are admired for their skills in turning a financial profit.

But killing a man? My brother Harry? Cavanaugh men are not that resourceful. (Even my brother Vincent, who rushed off after graduation to join the military and immediately got sent to Korea, probably wasn't that good at killing; he signed up in June and was dead before Christmas.)

I spent the next day downtown at City Hall and the following day at the public library. It's amazing what people can learn if they're willing to spend some time and work at it a bit.

I asked Betty about Rudolph Gateley when she came to clean.

"He's dead," she said. "What you want to know about him for?"

"I know he's dead. I wondered if you knew him."

"I knew him."

"What was he like?"

She finished dusting my mother's gate-legged table before she answered. "He was . . . sly. Slick, when he was younger; just oily when he got old. Used to work at the Rancher's Club, you 'member it?"

I nodded. The Rancher's Club had been a popular supper club several years ago. Rumor had it that high stake poker games and rowdy parties were conducted there and that many a prestigious businessman attended. It was on its way to becoming a possible scandal when one morning the employees arrived to find that the owner had cleaned out his bank account and left town.

"He drank and he gambled," she went on. "And that's what I know about the man." Betty sings in the choir at the Emmanuel Baptist Church; her tone clearly indicated her opinion of Mr. Rudolph Gateley. She attacked the grandfather clock vigorously with her dustrag.

I visited my brother Arthur and his wife Louella. Arthur said Tom Scaletti had been elected president of the Rotary Club. Louella said Gracie Win-

ston had bought herself a Solloflex exercise machine and claimed she worked out on it for an hour every day, did I believe that?

I told Louella what I believed about that. Then I asked about their yard.

"I thought winter would never end this year," Louella exclaimed. "When those first crocuses poked their little heads up, I was just so excited, weren't you? I've been thinking about putting pansies in along the front walk. What do you think?"

"I think pansies would be lovely. Don't you have a man who comes in?"

"Yes, but I like to dig in the dirt now and then."

"Who do you have?"

Louella looked at me.

"Your yard man. Who is it?"

"Oh. Well, we used to have Old Carl, but then his arthritis got so bad and so we were without for awhile and then Arthur asked Harry about their yard man and he said he didn't really recommend him, so we talked to Lottie and she suggested . . . now what is his name, Arthur? It's such a strange one. . . ."

"Scrapper," I said.

When it came time to leave, I told Louella not to bother seeing me to the car, that Arthur could do it.

"What did Harry say about his yard man?" I asked as we approached the driveway.

"Gosh, I don't know. I can call and ask him if it's important."

"No, no. It's nothing really. I was just wondering." I stood by my car and waited.

"Seems like he said something about the man was asking too much." As I got behind the wheel, he added, "Or maybe it was that he didn't trim the hedge right. . . ."

On Saturday Scrapper came by. He'd found someone who had seen Rudolph Gateley the night he died.

"Said a big car come by the park. The driver tooted the horn, and Rudy walked over and leaned down by the window. The guy heard two shots, Rudy dropped, and the car drove off."

"And this 'guy' reported that to the police?"

Scrapper shook his head. "Didn't want to tell me, even. That's why it took so long."

"I don't suppose he mentioned what kind of car it was, or what color? Or who was behind the wheel?"

"Said the car was big and dark. That's all he knew. He wasn't exactly sober at the time."

"So do you believe him, this not-exactly sober, fine upstanding citizen?"

Scrapper took his time answering. "I think he saw something, yeah. He was scared."

I told him what I'd learned so far. I didn't mention my brother Harry. There was no reason.

"Mr. Gateley could easily have blackmailed any number of men from the days of the Rancher's Club," I concluded.

Scrapper nodded in agreement.

"However, since he did mention the names of Scaletti and Winston, I will concentrate on them first."

Scrapper picked at a ragged thumbnail.

"Before I begin an investigation of every man in town."

Scrapper scratched his elbow. He is excellent at ignoring sarcasm.

After I took care of the usual Monday morning chores, I went to see Chief Wilkerson. On the way I drove past Cascadia Park. When I was a young girl, the annual Fourth of July celebrations filled the grounds to overflowing. A band played, dignitaries gave speeches, families picnicked, children shot off firecrackers. At nine o'clock an impressive display of fireworks capped a perfect day.

Now graffiti covered the old band pavilion and the once-cared-for expanse of grass had

become hard, ugly dirt. Old and young were still there in abundance, but rather than white linen suits and soft, flowered frocks, they wore filthy garments that I couldn't begin to describe. One youth spat at my car as I passed.

I had to wait a few minutes before Chief Wilkerson was available. "Miss Cavanaugh, you're looking mighty fine."

"Thank you, Wayne. I am fine."

"I was just going over the reports on the Gateley killing." Still standing, he indicated a file folder lying on his desk. "My men have been questioning some of the people in the surrounding area. So far no one has come up with anything."

I sat down. Chief Wilkerson shuffled the file around a bit, then sat down as well.

"I understand Rudolph Gateley used to work at the Rancher's Club."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I was wondering whether there might be a tie-in."

"The Rancher's Club closed down years ago."

"Three years and four months, to be exact."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Were you investigating the place at the time?"

Chief Wilkerson finally acknowledged that they were in-

vestigating reports of gambling, liquor violations, and possible instances of prostitution before the owner, one Gerald Hardesty, left town, effectively closing the club, and the investigation, down.

"Do you have any idea where Mr. Hardesty is now?"

"He was shot two years ago in Dallas. Police there thought it was gang-related. They never did catch his killer."

I thanked the chief for his time and rose to go. He stood and started to take my arm, but caught himself in time. Just because I am lame does not make me dependent. Before I opened the door, I turned and said, "Oh, by the way. Is it possible Mr. Hardesty received a warning? And that's why he left town? Thereby saving face for any number of prominent men in this town? And securing your position as chief of police?"

His eyes widened and his mouth worked, but nothing came out.

"Just a thought I had, that's all. Thank you again, Wayne."

One down, two to go.

Tom Scaletti was a big, florid man with too much hair and not enough space between his eyes. He wore expensive clothes that helped disguise his tendency to corpulence.

"Miss Cavanaugh, haven't seen you in a month of Sundays. Thinking of buying a house, are you?" He laughed his salesman's laugh.

"I was born in that house, I'll probably die in that house. But I have been thinking of a few renovations. I realize you're probably much too busy to be interested in my little job, but . . ."

"Don't be silly. More'n delighted to help you out. Scaletti Construction, we do it all, big or small." Hearty men do annoy me.

I glanced around his reception area, a large well-lit room with photos and drawings of houses on the walls and a large plot layout of his latest development in the center.

"Are these the new houses?"

"Yes indeedy, and they're all beauties. Your nephew Teddy and his new wife were just out looking at one the other day. They particularly liked this model over here." He pointed to a floorplan with a master bath the size of most folks' living rooms.

"Apparently young people these days use bathrooms for more than what I seem to need one for," I commented, and got another Scaletti chortle in response.

After he had shown me the points of interest on his plot

map (I noticed there was not a great abundance of flags marking properties sold), we retired to his office where I told him my fabricated tale of possible alterations I might desire and he gave me his spiel on what he could do for me. Once again as I was leaving I slipped in my little afterthought: "I'm quite sure you're prepared to deal with the possible repercussions of having skimped on insulation and using inferior wall-board?"

I had saved Judge Winston for last. Bruce was one of the most respected men in Kern County. He had taken me to a dance or two in our youth and had comported himself well on each occasion. A bit of a bore perhaps, but young men so frequently are.

"Jane, how lovely to see you." He took my hand in both of his and smiled widely. He did not look well. I suppose, at our age, some would think of us as old. Bruce actually looked it. "Come in, come in."

I sat in one of the two soft chocolate-colored leather chairs' in front of his desk and waited for him to settle into his large swivel chair. We chatted about old times, old acquaintances, various members of the Cavanaugh clan. I asked about Gracie.

"She's fine, fine. Got herself some notion that she's aging, can't imagine where she'd get an idea like that." He chuckled. "But she's fighting it with everything she's got or can purchase." He chuckled again.

I seemed to be collecting a lot of chortles and chuckles today. We sat in companionable silence for a moment. Then he led me into the very area I had come to discuss.

"Well, I know you haven't come to me for assistance with your investments; your brother Arthur has done well by you there all these years."

"He has, and I'm grateful. I know you've been very thoughtful in helping a number of my friends."

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Poor ladies. Their husbands die and they're left with all these money problems and not the slightest idea how to go about handling them. I didn't go looking for the job, you know. Just seemed to happen. I helped one, then another came along. Before I knew it, over the years I had a whole passel of 'em."

"Yes. And I imagine, at first, you really did do right by them."

He glanced up, startled.

"But then, when was it exactly? When you and Gracie bought the old Kirby mansion?

Or when you took your trip to Europe? You probably looked on it as borrowing that first time, didn't you?"

His face dropped.

"Why didn't you just put the money back in and go on? The woman, whoever she was, had no idea it was missing. I suppose it was too easy, though. What do you do, just take a little bit from each? Is that how it works?"

He rubbed one hand across his mouth.

"It's bound to come out sooner or later, Bruce."

There was no response. Finally I rose from my chair and left.

My bad leg ached as I got behind the wheel of my car. I thought about going to see Harry and decided to wait.

At home I changed out of my town clothes and went downstairs for a glass of tea. The afternoon seemed unseasonably warm and made me listless on the one hand, restless on the other. I took my beverage and went out to sit in the front swing for the first time this spring.

The tea was nearly gone when my brother's car pulled into the driveway. Harry walked up the path and sat down on the front step. We watched the bees work their



way from bloom to bloom on the honeysuckle vine.

"What's that in your glass?"

"Iced tea. Want some?"

"I wouldn't mind."

I went to the kitchen and poured him a glass, refilled mine, added sprigs of fresh mint, and returned to the porch.

"Why are you asking around about Rudy Gateley?"

"Scrapper asked me to."

Harry made a face. "Rudy Gateley was no good. He'd been a troublemaker all his life. Bound for a bad end. The only surprise was that someone waited this long."

I took a drink. The tea was cold, the mint refreshing.

"You've upset a lot of people in this town, Jane."

"Yes. I know. And I've upset you."

"Well, yes, you have. I worry about you. You mustn't go around shaking a lot of old bones, Jane. It's not . . . it's not good to do that."

"I suppose it was at the Rancher's Club?"

"What was?"

"Where Rudolph Gateley got whatever it was he was black-mailing you with."

Harry sighed. Beside him the droning of the bees continued.

"It only happened once. That's all. I never was much of a gambler, you know that. But

all the men were going there, it was the thing to do for awhile. And sometimes Gerald brought women in, you know, to entertain. . . ."

Such a silly thing. I leaned back in the swing, remembering the times we used to play out here in the summer. My sister, before she died in the playhouse fire that scarred my legs. My brothers. Cousins, so many cousins. Was it really all that long ago?

Before Harry left we cut some of the iris from Mother's garden for him to take to Flora.

I had washed up the dinner dishes and was heading for the living room when the doorbell rang.

"Jane, I'm sorry to bother you."

"Gracie, what a pleasant surprise. Come in."

Flora was right; Gracie Winston had lost weight. I can't say I thought she looked any younger, but then I knew how old she was. "Would you care for some coffee? Or a cup of tea?"

"No, nothing really. I won't take a minute." She sat across from me, in my grandmother's rocker, and came right to the point. "I'm sure you didn't realize how you upset Bruce this afternoon, Jane. He's not well at all, and your vicious attack certainly didn't help. He's going to

pay those women back, every one of them. But it will take a little time." She clutched her purse tightly. "It's not as though they missed the money really, they wouldn't even have had it without his help. He deserved it."

"It was wrong, Gracie. They turned to him for help, and he stole from them."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, what would you know? You could have anything you wanted, and you're nothing but a dried up old maid." She reached inside the purse and drew out a revolver. "I knew you wouldn't let it rest. Couldn't give him the chance to put it all back, could you, Miss High and Mighty?" The hand holding the gun was very steady.

"You really should've gotten rid of the weapon after you killed Rudy Gateley," I said.

"I thought it might come in handy again. And it has. Your death, during the robbery of your house, naturally, will make it look like some 'garbage' off the street killed both of you."

She was getting quite worked up, so much so that she didn't hear Scrapper enter the room behind her until he spoke.

"I'd put the gun down if I was you, ma'am," he said.

The police came and took

Gracie away. I had to call Chief Wilkerson at home and assure him we would go down to the station in the morning to give our statements before all the officers would leave.

I poured two snifters of my homemade blackberry brandy and carried them to the kitchen table.

"Pretty risky lettin' all those folks know you knew their secrets," Scrapper said.

"Only one person shot Rudolph Gateley, no matter how many he finagled money from."

He ignored the tone of my remark, aware of my mood and willing to allow me my unpleasantness. When we finished our brandies, I poured two more.

"I'm glad it was Gracie," I said, "and not Bruce."

"She'll tell the police he was in on it."

"And we'll tell them differently. He'll have enough sorrow on his plate as it is."

Scrapper turned his snifter slowly, staring at the rich purple liquid.

"Throughout this whole thing," I said, "I never heard a single person besides yourself say one decent thing about this man. Bruce, while he is guilty of extortion, has done any number of good and beneficial deeds. Tom Scaletti is involved

with several organizations that provide funding for charities.

"Your friend Rudy cosied up to people and then fed off them and their shabby little secrets. No matter that it wasn't for large sums, it was still a nasty, and ultimately a dangerous, game. I don't know of one single redeeming quality he pos-

sessed. He truly was a worthless old man, and I can't for the life of me understand what you saw in him."

Scrapper took a swallow of brandy. "He was a lot like you," he said.

"Like me!"

"Yes, ma'am. He thought I was all right the way I am, too."

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*(continued from page 6)*

from the grisly details of murder to Beatrix Potter and Mrs. Tiggy Winkle."

Finally... in 1995 the Shamus Awards will be presented not at Bouchercon as usual but at the first PWA convention, called EyeCon'95, in Milwaukee. Reservations are being accepted; fans as well as writers are welcome. The conference will run from June 15-18, 1995; Sue Grafton is Guest of Honor and Les Roberts is Toastmaster.

The registration fee before January 15, 1995, is \$125; af-

terwards, it will be \$150. That includes the fee for the PWA Buffet Luncheon and the Saturday night banquet at which the Shamus Awards will be given, as well as all the programs and panels presented at the convention. It will take place at the Hyatt Regency Milwaukee, where the room rate will be \$88 per night for attendees.

For additional information or registration forms, write to EyeCon'95 at 3734 West Ohio Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53215.

# UNSOLVED

by

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the January issue.*

The engraved card that the unsmiling man handed across my desk read: JASON F. STONE/FIRST FEDERAL BANK & TRUST OF NEWARK/PRESIDENT. "You probably know why I'm here," he said.

"The robbery was reported in all the media, sir. Please sit down," I said. "Now, what actually happened?"

His account was little more than what had been made public. The day before, at a few minutes before noon, two armed and masked men in dark business suits had entered the bank. One grabbed a young woman as hostage and threatened to shoot her unless they immediately received five hundred thousand dollars in unmarked bills. One held a satchel open while the other kept his automatic trained on the room full of customers, all the while holding the young woman as a shield.

"Hearing the commotion," Stone continued, "I came out of my office. I couldn't take chances with the young woman's life in danger. 'Hurry and do as they say,' I ordered. 'And don't anyone trip the alarm.' It was over in minutes. Still holding the terrified young woman in front of them, they backed out the door. At that moment a black BMW pulled up, they jumped inside, and sped away. The BMW had been stolen; the police found it abandoned ten blocks away. No one got a good look at the driver, and no one witnessed the transfer to another car. It went like clockwork."

"Professionals," I declared. "Any leads?"

"None, Mr. Tillett. The Feds are investigating, of course. But my board has authorized me to hire your agency in hope this can be cleared up before other thugs get the idea that our bank is a pushover."

"What about a reward?" I asked. "That sometimes speeds up the action."

"We have decided that fifty thousand is as high as we can go."

"That should start something," I said.

It did. Every kook in the U.S. began phoning and mailing in "leads," "tips," and "clues," thinking we were running some kind of sweepstakes. A month passed while we checked out maybe two hundred. Then I came to a letter that said, "All three persons involved in the robbery are now living separately in Floravale. Each is in a brick house with blue shutters."

This was more specific than most, so my men and I drove over to Floravale, a small town about fifty miles to the west. We found brick houses with blue shutters all right—except there were six such houses: 281 and 334 Maple Avenue, 334 and 342 Walnut Street, and 281 and 342 Cherry Drive. Since there were only three robbers, we had a problem. I contacted our informant, who supplied (reluctantly) the following additional information. She evidently feared getting "too involved," as she expressed it.

- (1) The six houses in question were occupied by five men and five women. Four of the men were married (their wives using the same names), and one man lived alone, as did one of the women. Their last names were Fallon, Garver, Harker, Ingres, Jepson, and Kiddle. One woman was named Betty. The men all had jobs, but none of the women was employed.
- (2) Andy and Delia were not married to each other, but both had the same house number.
- (3) The carpenter, dentist, and editor all had different house numbers. They included Dan, Mr. Garver, and a man with house number 334.
- (4) The dentist was married but not to Cathy. Neither lived on Walnut Street.
- (5) Mr. Harker (whose house number was not 342) was married but not to Elena.
- (6) The last name of the bus driver, a married man who did not live on Cherry Drive, was not Ingres.
- (7) The editor did not reside on Maple Avenue.
- (8) Cathy had a lower house number than did Alice (who was not the dentist's wife).
- (9) Carl, Delia, and the architect had the last names of Fallon, Harker, and Ingres. None of the three lived on Maple Avenue. Two of them participated in the robbery.
- (10) Alice, Cathy, and Elena were married to Earl, Mr. Jepson, and the architect. Neither they nor their husbands had anything to do with the robbery.

- (11) Mr. Kiddle, the bus driver, and Brad (whose last name was not Ingres) lived on different streets, but none had the number 334 in his address. Two of them were involved in the bank holdup.

That was enough information. I arrested the three and recovered nearly all of the stolen money. The informant was overjoyed with the fifty thousand dollar reward. As I learned later, she was ratting on her cousins. No wonder she was so nervous and evasive.

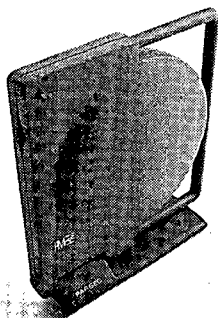
*Who stuck up the bank? Who drove the getaway car?*

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See page 250 for the solution to the December puzzle.

# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

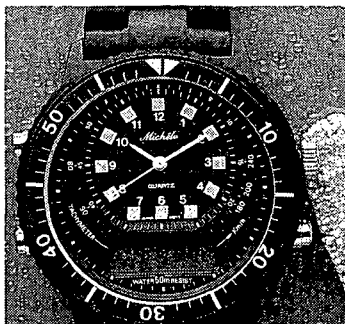
## ▼ ENERGIZE YOUR RADIO WITH THE PARSEC 2000™



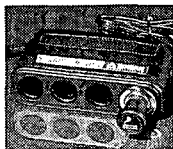
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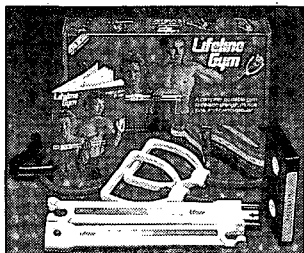
phones, disc players, compressors, and other automotive appliances. Plugs into your single light socket: converts it to four. Unlike your existing socket this 4-way device has an integrated overload fuse to protect your vehicle's circuitry. \$17.98 (\$4.75) #2064. 2 For 29.98 (\$5.95) #2064-2.

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# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

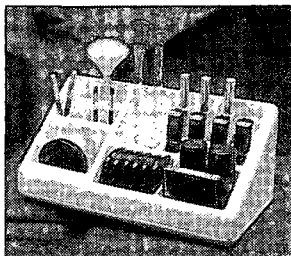


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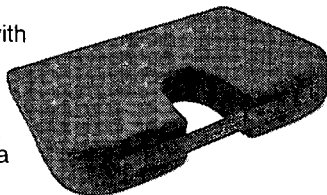


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# Night Deposit

by Jas. R. Petrin

**W**hat happened, they had to take Ma along in the end because there was just no way two guys could handle it by themselves. Zeke griping at George about it, going, "You sure there's no other way, bro? I mean, are you absolutely sure about that?"

George was sure about it.

It was Zeke's plan, but George had gone over the angles a hundred times, working them all different ways. And two guys just wasn't enough.

The reason, what it was, you had to have somebody on the door. That was a fact. No getting away from it. Like, even with the door locked, anybody with a passkey could just suddenly walk in on you, and there you'd be, elbow-deep in cookies and bad things starting to happen. Very bad things.

So they had to have Ma to take care of that angle, George was thinking. Keep an eye on the door. And what Zeke was thinking, they'd used Ma for that sort of a job before and the results had been complete and total screwups.

"What if she screws up?" Zeke groused.

"She's not going to screw up. How can she screw up? She watches the door and that's it. A moron could do it."

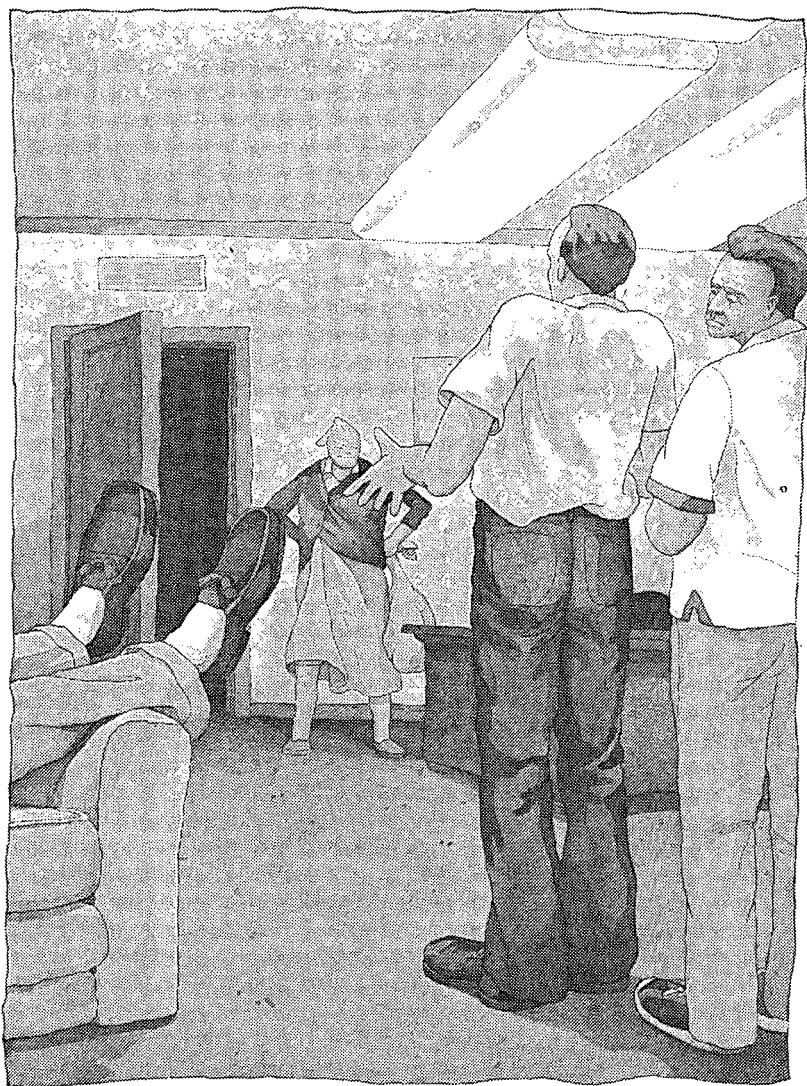
"Let's get a moron, then, it's a safer bet, pal."

George fixed his intellectually challenged brother with a cool, sobering gaze. "We already got one moron. We don't want to exceed our limit, do we?"

In the end Zeke had to cave in. He said, All right, they would take Ma along to look after the door, but by God he was going to hold George personally responsible for her. Whatever happened, Zeke said, he was going to hold George personally responsible. Yeah, well, what else is new, George said.

So Ma was in.

And this is the way they would work it. Pull up outside the club a couple of minutes to closing, then the three of them walk in off the street. The idea, the way Zeke was figuring it, get inside just before they closed the place. That way it



"WHAT HE'S SAYING, YOU SHOULD MAYBE TAKE THE STOCKING OFF YOUR FACE," ZEKE TOLD HER. "YOU LOOK LIKE SOMETHING FROM STAR TREK—I DUNNO—A NYLONIAN."

wouldn't be long before the staff went home, and Ma could put Zeke's "big idea" into effect—double-locking the door and making sure the staff had hung the CLOSED sign in the window; if they hadn't, hang the damn thing there herself. And then plunk herself down in one of the humongous leather bucket chairs they had there, to watch the situation and keep her eye on things.

If it wasn't for Ma, the plan would be fine, Zeke believed.

Wait and see was George's opinion.

The way the place was laid out, you walked in and you were in a sort of lobby, a dark-timbered anteroom where they lined the customers up butt to bumper on busy nights, the room crazy with road signs and battered antique gas pumps, and dozens of license plates nailed to the walls. This scrap metal placed strategically around to set the mood of the dump, which the owner—Zeke referred to him as "the Big Guy"—called the Gas Station. It was a gas station, all right, George thought. To the left as you came in, double doors led to the club proper, where Station customers could eat a steak, play the VLT machines, and get gassed up. And maybe if they were lucky they could ar-

range to have their oil changed. On the right a single open archway, with a chain stretched across it to keep the lowlife out, protected a staircase that led to the second floor, which was where the manager's office was located.

Which was the room Zeke was trying to get to. The room where they counted the money.

Heading out that night, at the wheel of Ma's Dodge, Zeke laid on a pep talk, the guy really strung out, twitchy after arguing with George about Ma all day, and out of cigarettes, which was why he was chewing plug tobacco and telling them he felt like a major league pitcher with the bases loaded. Major league. Man. You had to laugh. Every few minutes down went his window and a jet of brown saliva shot out into the night. Zeke the major leaguer with a dribble down his chin, going:

"No point in us feelin' guilty about this. The way to look at it is we'll be teachin' this guy a lesson. The guy we're gonna hit, the Big Guy, the guy owns the place, I heard he's one a the worst creeps ever sleazed out of a sewer, know that I'm sayin'? A bum, know what I mean? A scumbag. A real—"

"You sound like you're talkin' about yourself," Ma said.

Down went Zeke's window, and a brown jet shot out.

"Ma, don't start, okay? All I'm tryin' to do—"

"Sounds just like you. You an' your brother George, here. Creep, bum, weasel . . ."

"Ma, listen—"

"No. You listen. You go ahead and set this whole thing up, nobody comes to me an' asks for *my* opinion, do they? No. An' I got more brain power in my left leg than the both of you got in your two skulls put together. I'm *sittin'* on more."

"We hadda hurry an' work out the details, Ma."

"Tell me about it. You couldn't even pick a decent time of day, for the love of Pete. The right *night*, for cryin' in the sink. It's *my anniversary*, for the love of all that's holy, can't you weasels remember nothing? You know I always celebrate the fourteenth of the month, the one an' only high point in my entire life, the day your dad ran off." She settled back in the seat with a sigh, carried away with it now. "How it happened, we'd just ordered our deep-fried onion loaf in the lunchroom back of the Brooks Hotel, an' he said, 'Scuse me, I gotta go take a whiz,' he said—he was polite that way—an' he went, an' he never came back. I never seen him again. I hadda eat the whole onion loaf

all by myself. *And* I got stuck with the bill . . ."

She could go on for hours. Thank God for Zeke. He shoved a stick in her spokes.

"It hadda be tonight, Ma, tonight's when the loaners bring in their accounts. See, they slip in an' out all evening, droppin' off money, takin' back their floats, an' headin' on out for another go round. An' the reason we're goin' in late, just before the club downstairs closes up, is because by then all the loaners have come an' gone, an' their money'll be all counted an' collected in a night deposit bag up there in the office. That's how they do it. A guy used to work there told me. What the Big Guy does, he slips the loansharking dough in with the nightclub receipts, an' then he's covered. Nobody suspects nothing."

"You must be kidding," Ma sneered. "If you two dopes could figure it out, the whole damn city must know what the big goon does up there."

"You know, an' we know, a few other people, that's not the whole city."

"The whole city," Ma said. "The nuts in the booby hatch know. The stiff's in the morgue. You'd be the last to find out."

"Ma—"

"Think you're so smart."

"Ma, listen—"



"Coupla goddamn Frankensteins."

"You mean Einsteins, Ma," George put in.

"Look, I guess I know a Einstein from a Frankenstein, you weasel. When I look at you."

Ma rambled on. In addition to her annoying monologue, George had to listen to Zeke's angry mutterings in the dark of the car, but he felt no pity for his brother. Zeke ought to know better. Getting into this with Ma was plain crazy. Psychology 101. Argue with Ma, then book yourself in for a bleeding ulcer treatment.

"Gettin' back to it," Zeke said finally, "right after we get in the door, me and George gotta start up the stairs—an' we gotta be ready with the stockings, to pull them over our heads. Upstairs is off limits except to staff, so anybody spots us up there, they're gonna know we ain't come to read the meter, an' we sure as hell don't wanna be recognized."

"Hoo, boy," Ma said, "listen to it. Couple of bigshots. As if anybody'd recognize you. Except maybe the city zookeeper. He might think the weasel cage sprung a leak."

"What I mean to say, Ma, these guys are dangerous."

"Oh, so now they're dangerous, are they? Something else you forgot to tell me. What am I

supposed to do then, something starts to go wrong? Stagger around collecting open wounds? The hell with that. I want a stocking over my face, too."

"How will a stocking protect you from wounds?"

"It's better than nothing."

"Not really."

"Better than a kick with a frozen boot."

"Ma, you're downstairs, you're one of the customers, for all they know. No way they're gonna connect you with me and George, are they?"

"If you mean will they know you're my sons, I should hope not. You're too big, dumb, an' ugly to be sons of mine, any fool can see that."

"Right, Ma, we're too dumb an' ugly, so I guess you got nothing to worry about." That sour note twisting Zeke's voice, like he wished he could toss her out of the car right there in the middle of the Midtown Bridge and save them all a lot of grief later on. "You sit downstairs long as you can, till, say, maybe a quarter past, when the waiters start putting the run to everybody, then you hide out in the ladies' washroom while they chase the customers out."

"Great. Somethin' else I didn't know. I gotta go hide in the can."

"We forgot to mention it, that's all."

"What else did you forget to mention? Armed guards? How about Rottweiler dogs? What if they send Rottweiler dogs into the can after me, eh? Did you think about that, Mr. Frankenstein? Rottweiler dogs?"

"Ma. There ain't gonna be no dogs, not even chihuahuas. An' they never check the can out properly, it's too much like work. Maybe they open the door an' glance in, but you're in a cubicle, ain't you? All they see is your feet, so you only gotta stand on the toilet seat."

"I see. You know all about it, don't you? I guess you spend a lotta time in the ladies' can. An' what if a security guard, the one with the Rottweiler dogs, gets a nature urge an' decides to come *into* the cubicle? You expect I'm gonna climb the goddamn wall, or just what?"

"Oh, man." Zeke turned to George. "You wanna talk to her, bro?"

"That's not going to happen, Ma," George said.

"But what if it *does*?"

Ma could go on like this all night. George said to her:

"Let's get back to the main point, Ma. The place quiets down, you go back out to the lobby and sit down in one of the big chairs in the shadows behind a gas pump. From there, if

you have to, you can deke back into the washroom. And all you got to do if anybody comes in the street door, or if anybody still left in the club suddenly appears and starts upstairs, is go outside to the car and hit the horn a couple of times. The office window's right above, so we're bound to hear you, and we'll know what's going on and get out fast."

"Say again?" Ma laughed. "You dopes wouldn't know what was going on if Larry King was up there, live, to yell it in your ear."

She kept laughing like that, bitterly, all the rest of the way to the club.

**I**t was a couple of minutes to closing. Still some cars parked in the side lot next to the Gas Station, but Zeke said that was okay because a few customers in there would take some of the heat off of them. Ma laughed at that, but at least she didn't say anything. They left the car in the street, just under the second floor windows, and then they went into the club.

The reception area was empty. Completely deserted. No hostess there to greet them at this late hour, just as Zeke had said.

Good old Zeke, standing there with his Quasimodo face hanging out.



"What's the matter?" George asked.

Zeke was looking down at the door, thick fingers scraping in the beard, stubble of his chin. "Hey, bro, lookit. No way we can doublelock this thing ourselves. You got to have a key."

It was true. There was no simple latch mechanism, no button, no chain, nothing like that; the secondary lock installed on the door was a key-operated deadbolt. George wanted to turn around right there that minute and walk back out to the car and drive home. Like, jeez, not that it was any big deal, but the guy was supposed to have cased the joint, right? And doublelocking had been his own idea, and he hadn't even had the presence of mind to check the hardware out. Man.

And there was no "closed" sign, either.

"I was positive there'd be a 'closed' sign," Zeke said stupidly, "every kinda business has a 'closed' sign to hang out."

"Every business except this one," George muttered.

Then Ma chimed in, of course.

"An' there ain't no chair."

This was also a fact. The big leather buckets were gone. So was the long leather bench that had sprawled along the wall. All that remained in the de-

serted room were the weatherbeaten gas pumps, the road signs, and license plates. Ma was getting really teed off now, screwing her face up into tight little wrinkled lines and cranking up her volume a couple of notches.

"You weasels said there'd be a chair for me to sit in! I'm lookin' all around this place, an' I don't see no damn chair. I don't see nothin' even *resembling* a chair. I guess it's an *invisible* chair, is that what it is? Do you weasels see any kind of a chair around here for me to sit in?"

Zeke spun around then and hissed at Ma like a steam valve, his face blue with anger and one big blunt finger pressed to his lips. Zeke worried someone in the next room would notice them, that Ma was going to pull one of her usual stunts and create a scene.

George was still working out the furniture thing—were they in the midst of redecorating the place, he wondered. Or maybe, what it was, had they sent the stuff in for recovering?

Ma was defiant.

"Chairs! You were jerking me around, weren't you!"

George said gently: "Ma. Listen." He pointed through the door that led into the club. "See the little table there by the wall, it's not occupied? Look,

it's got flowers. You love flowers. Change of plan, Ma. You sit down at that table, you can see all the way out of the club and into this room, and keep an eye on the door from there. It's just three, four yards farther away, that's all."

"Yeah? Thanks for figuring it out for me, Frankenstein. I could also grab a chair from that table, drag it out here and sit down on it right where I'm s'posed to, couldn't I?"

Ma was still hollering. George tried to quiet her, whispering, "No, Ma. No, you couldn't. See, rearranging the furniture, that'd attract attention, Ma. We don't want to attract attention. Some waiter'd come along and put the arm on you."

"Some waiter better not if he don't wanna wait tables the rest of his life with a twelve pound brace from his prong to his prat."

"Will you tone it down?" Zeke said, exasperated.

"It's just we don't want no one getting suspicious," George told her.

"Suspicious? Hah! That's a laugh." Ma tossed her large head. "Couple of deadheads like you lurching around the place, you think nobody'll get suspicious? Hah! *Hah-hah!*"

Zeke towered over her, breathing.

"Ma! That's it! Are you gonna shut up? Are you gonna—ahh!" He hobbled away. "Jesus, she kicked me, bro. My leg . . . oh, man . . . oh, Jesus . . ."

George got Ma to cooperate and to go in and sit down at the table in the restaurant after he dipped into his wallet and gave her the last twenty dollars he had so she could order a gin and an appetizer if the place was still serving, telling her no, he didn't know if they served deep-fried onion loaf or not, she'd just have to find out for herself; and telling her, Don't forget to go hide in the can later, Ma; and then leaving her there frowning around the room looking for a waiter to snarl at.

Bodan Tom—real name, Tomski—tried taking some of the weight off his feet by pressing his buttocks against the back wall of the closet. But this meant he had to shift back a pace and rise up an inch or two on his toes, and he could only hold that position less than a minute before the leg cramps came back and he had to sag forward and feel the necktie cut into his throat again. Funk, that bum, trying to kill him, trussing him up like this. Trying to strangle him. Hands tied behind him and his necktie turned back to front and knot-

tended to the steel clothes bar at the top of the closet.

Bodan Tom got his legs under him and relieved the pressure on his neck again. Man, his thighs hurt. Every time he moved, wire coat hangers jangled in his ears.

He was wondering if his kid brother Joseph was going to show up tonight. Sometimes he did, and they'd go out together for some cabbage rolls, a little borscht, at an all-nighter they liked. And sometimes he didn't. . . .

This was a hell of a thing to happen. You didn't expect this kind of treatment from somebody you'd been doing business with for—what was it?—nearly two years? So what had gone wrong?

It had to be the result of Bodan Tom's being too nice a guy. When you were too nice a guy, there was always somebody jockeying to take advantage of your better nature. Like Funk in the middle of the room tonight, waving his arms around

The last of the loaners had been and gone—some putz named Yocum, or Yokum, who didn't remind Bodan Tom of the country singer but of the cartoon character, the guy always screwing up, this time beating a bad debt so bad they'd had to take the guy away from the pet

shop he ran, sirens wailing, in an ambulance, the animals back in the shop going nuts, the dogs yap-yapping, the birds squawk-squawking, the goldfish going glub, glub, glub like they were gonna break out of their tanks and flop after Yokum and tear the butt out of his pants. And even then Yokum hadn't got the vig. He'd had the nerve to show up at the office almost a hundred and fifty down.

Man, it was hard doing business in these times.

And then Funk.

This guy definitely a piece of work.

Funk at the door putting his head in and grinning like he was there to collect for the Policeman's Benevolent Fund or something, this guy who truly did believe in the spirit of giving—to him. Always on the squeeze. The thing about Funk, he was like a pain you don't talk about, right there where it gets you the worst, and no ointment for it. But what could a businessman do? It was the same everywhere. You tried to get ahead, and you were always getting stiffed by the man. Call it grease, call it taxes, there it was.

Bodan already in a nasty mood, and Funk going:

"So how'd you make out tonight, good buddy? Business booming?"

"All the time," Bodan Tom said, wondering what kind of a crunching sound you'd get if you suddenly kicked the door shut with Funk's smirking head poking through like that.

"Glad to hear it, good buddy, glad to hear it," Funk said, coming uninvited into the room and dropping his coat over a chair. "Like, with all this recession, depression, whatever the hell it is, a guy don't hardly know where he stands any more, does he?"

"Recession is good for my business," Bodan said; then immediately regretted saying that, steering away from it, saying, "My street business, I'm talking about. A bar isn't really worth running any more, the liquor taxes so high, the drunk-driving laws so tight a man's got to oil the fenders of his car to slip home at night. I had to lay two people off. The government's killing my trade."

"Gover'ment looks out for itself," Funk agreed.

"You think so? I'm not so sure. The government, the only way it stays healthy is to let money move and change hands. When it slows money down, it hurts its own self. But it's lost track. It don't even know where the money comes from no more. From working people like me. It lost track of that."

"Speaking of money changing hands—" Funk began.

Now we get to it, Bodan Tom thought.

"—what I was wondering, isn't it about time for a raise, good buddy? Hey, listen, I'm working my heinie off for you out there, you know? Making sure your operation don't hit any snags, know what I mean? New rules and regulations every day you need help with. And, hey, I haven't had a cost of living adjustment in six or seven months."

Three months, Bodan thought. And he thought, Cost of living adjustment, like you're an employee or something, huh? He said to Funk, "How much you want this time?"

Funk grew a face. "Come on, good buddy, don't take it like that. It's business, that's all. Hey, wouldn't you turn up the heat on me a bit if our places were reversed?"

I would turn up the heat on you so high you would explode like a fat garlic sausage, Bodan thought, liking the image, Funk on a gigantic barbecue with a skewer through his duff and the superheated juices jetting out of him.

Funk ambled over to the desk. The way this guy made himself at home. Man, it got to you. Now poking at the canvas

night deposit bag Bodan Tom hadn't had time to hide.

"This the take tonight, buddy?" Funk hefted the bag, grinning. "I'd hafta say you're right, this darn recession ain't touched you."

It was too much.

"Put the bag down," Bodan Tom said.

"Take it easy, buddy." Funk grinning and grinning, the bum always grinning, you wanted to do something about that grinning, reach out and take some teeth out of the picture. Funk squeezing the bag now, going, "Yes, buddy, this has been a very good night for you, I think. Now what're these lumps right here? Lemme guess. Bundles of twennies? Fifties? Or maybe even—"

"I told you to put the bag down," Bodan Tom said with a steel edge to his voice, and he was surprised to find that somehow the little Iver Johnson .22 Pony had jumped into his hand, didn't remember deciding to draw it, but here it was, like magic, pointed straight at Funk's smirking horse-jawed face.

Funk glanced up, saw the gun, and lowered the bag slowly and gently to his side with the good humor bleeding out of his eyes. Steel-edged hostility there now. But holding

onto the grin, though, like his face came that way.

"Good buddy," he said. "Here now, good buddy. What's this? What're you aiming that little rat-poker at me for? I thought we were partners, good buddy. Hey?"

"Not any more," Bodan said.

Funk stepped around the table.

"Holy doodle. Lemme unnerstand this. You saying our partnership is all washed up?"

"You're saying it."

Funk shrugged. "Well, if I'm saying it... then I guess it must be true."

He feinted left by tossing the bag at the couch, at the same time making a sudden lunge for Bodan's gun with his big right hand, Bodan backpedaling and barely managing to get off one, two, crisp shots at the other man, thinking the slugs went home but not completely sure about it, Funk not even pausing but closing with Bodan and knocking the Pony to the floor.

Funk's left hand swept up then and pinned Bodan Tom to the wall by the throat.

"You little garlic sucker, you tried to kill me. I don't believe it. I oughtta break your neck for that." There was blood oozing from a wound under Funk's ear, and he pawed at it like a bear, glancing down and seeing

the smudge of blood on his thumb and index finger. "You come close, good buddy, but I think you're gonna hafta get yourself a bigger gun. What do you think?"

Funk had all the moves. Like neutralizing people was second nature for him, which it was, the dumb cop. He spun Bodan Tom around face to the wall, stepped on the back of Bodan's shoe, and drove a knee into his leg, Bodan's foot coming up with the pain real fast and leaving the shoe behind. Seconds later Bodan had a shoelace twisted around his wrists, holding them tight, tight, very tight.

"Course, I could cuff you, you little bohunk, but that'd mean leaving a clue behind, wouldn't it?"

He shoved Bodan into the closet.

"An' if I shot you, same thing. That crap gun of yours'd leave your powder burns on me, or mine'd leave my bullets in you. So I got another idea, good buddy..."

"Let me go," Bodan pleaded, "you're hurt. I can help you."

"Buddy, I been bit worse by mosquitoes. Like I said, you oughtta get yourself a *gun*." With a jerk Funk twisted Bodan's tie up under his ear and passed it around the steel closet bar, heaving Bodan up onto his

toes. He knotted the tie, then picked up the Iver Johnson, pumping the cartridges out and holding the gun gingerly to avoid leaving fingerprints, then tucked it back into Bodan's belt. He stood back, pale now and swaying slightly on his feet. "Goddamn, I must be getting old, good buddy. This exercise is... pooping me out. Anyways... you... may be here a while. Have a good one!"

Funk slammed the closet door on Bodan Tom.

Downstairs George took a last regretful glance at the door lock, wishing that Ma were able to doublelock it but accepting that there was nothing they could do about that now. Zeke, for all his grouching, making them even more dependent on Ma. George unhooked the chain that was stretched across the archway, let Zeke squeeze by, then passed through himself and did the chain back up. They climbed the stairs together, Zeke one step ahead and favoring the leg Ma had bruised. He wasn't happy either.

"I told you not to bring her. I told you that, didn't I?"

"Don't worry about it."

"She'll slap me up the head or whack me one of these days, an' that's gonna be it. I'm gonna turn around an' do some-

thing to that woman, pal. Kick-  
ing me like that. Jesus."

"If you do anything," George  
advised, "you better do it right,  
or what's left of you will be rat-  
tling around loose in a shoe-  
box." One of the steps creaked  
just then, and he cringed. "I  
want to tell you, big brother, I  
can't believe this guy doesn't  
post himself a guard."

"He used to, but he got  
sloppy."

"He's not mobbed up or any-  
thing, is he?"

"You kidding? In this town?  
Only mob here is the mob at  
City Hall."

There was a dark corridor at  
the top of the stairs, you could  
hardly see your hand in front  
of your face.

"Be nice if they put some  
lights on," Zeke complained.

"We don't want lights,"  
George reminded him, and  
gave his head a shake. Man.  
This guy. Put a brain in his  
head and see what improve-  
ment you got. Upgrade to a  
half-witted klunge. An ape  
with an attitude. Scary.

Zeke's big hand beckoned.  
There was a door at the end of  
the hall. Zeke looked at George  
and George nodded—sure, *you*  
open it—and Zeke turned the  
handle carefully and peered  
inside.

"What the hell," he said  
hoarsely. "Nobody here." Then

he hesitated, reconsidering.  
"Wait a sec. Could be I'm wrong  
about that." He eased farther  
into the room.

By looking over Zeke's shoul-  
der, George could see that the  
room was an office, all right,  
and a large one, fitted out like  
some sort of working bachelor  
apartment. There was a wide  
mahogany desk at one end,  
some fancy chairs and lamps,  
and a full-sized couch, this last  
piece of furniture situated with  
its back towards them and hav-  
ing a pair of large black tassled  
men's loafers sticking out over  
one end of it, with the toes  
pointing up. He watched Zeke  
creep silently forward and peer  
down.

"Ask him about the money,"  
George whispered.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"He's dead."

"Dead? Get out."

"I'm tellin' you, this guy's  
dead. Come here an' look at  
him, you don't believe me. Is  
this a dead guy or isn't it?"

George followed Zeke into  
the room, not liking this devel-  
opment, not liking it at all. He  
stopped by the couch where he  
could see over the back of it and  
took a careful long look for him-  
self, discovering that the guy,  
on the couch was a big-boned,  
heavy-jowled man in a rumpled  
sports coat and wrinkled grey



slacks, stretched out on his back with one hand trailing on the floor like he was asleep. Only he wasn't asleep. People didn't fall asleep with their eyes and mouth wide open—except Zeke maybe on the kitchen floor sometimes, after a hoot. But the real giveaway was—look at it!—a patch of dark, caked blood on the side of the big guy's head.

"He's dead, all right."

"I already told you that."

"Who is he?"

"How the hell do I know?"

"He's pretty tall, sticking out over the arm of the couch like that. You think it's the Big Guy?"

"I just told you I don't know. I never actually seen the Big Guy before." Zeke straightened up, giving the room a quick sweep with his eyes. "So, little brother, whaddya think?"

"What do I think? I think we better get our buns out of here while we still got the option, big brother. I mean, here we are, we're in a room that's off limits and the first thing we find, we almost trip over it, is a body? I think we better get our buns out of here fast."

"What about our dough?"

"Our dough? It never was *our* dough, pal. We were going to take it, remember, from somebody else. To teach the Big Guy a lesson is the reason you gave.

Well, I'd say somebody's already taken care of that for us and gave the Big Guy a lesson he'll never forget."

"Shows how dumb you are," Zeke snorted. "He already forgot it. He's dead." Zeke's face turned hard and stubborn then, not giving anything. "But I'll just tell you somethin', bro. I come here for that dough, an' if it's here in this room I'm gonna find it, unnerstand?"

"You're gonna get us arrested for murder, that's what you're gonna do."

"We didn't kill nobody. And if the dough's here, I want it. We're gonna find it, pal."

George felt a sick feeling creep through his gut. Oh, man, why did he keep letting this dope talk him into things?

But he wasn't going to stand there and argue. No percentage in that. Instead he began pulling drawers open, rummaging, looking for anything resembling a night deposit bag, thinking if they were actually going to have to search the place to satisfy Zeke, then the best thing was to get it over and done with in a hell of a hurry.

Zeke's big hand suddenly flagged him again.

"Shut up. You hear that?"

They stood stock still. After a moment, George could hear what Zeke was referring to, what sounded like a baritone

voice droning in the woodwork somewhere. Turning his head to get a fix, he decided the sound was associated with a narrow closet door at one end of the room, the actual words being indistinguishable and coming at them in murmurs with long stretches of silence in between. Zeke went over and pressed a hairy ear to the door.

"Hey, bro, there's some goon in here talkin' to hisself."

"Great, let him talk," George said, with a glance at the body on the couch. "Let's get out of here."

"Hang on. There's the dough, remember? Maybe Closet Man knows where we can find it." Frowning, he cautiously eased the door open.

It was a closet, all right. There were men's clothes hanging in it. Three or four suits hanging there, a raincoat, lots of empty hangers. Also a short fat man, the fat man more or less hanging in the closet with his necktie turned back to front and knotted behind his head to the steel clothes bar. There was a small handgun stuffed under the bulge of his midriff, in his belt. He suddenly stopped muttering to himself, opened his eyes wider, and said in surprise, "Who the hell are you?"

Zeke reached out to take the gun away from him, then hesitated, the dope just in time re-

membering the dead guy on the couch. He took it with the tips of his fingers and dropped it on the floor.

"Us?" Zeke was surprised at the question. "We, uh . . ."

"We're cops," George announced.

"Yeah," Zeke agreed, "yeah, that's it. Cops." Then he scratched his neck, obviously wondering what to say next, wondering what an actual cop might say, as if he didn't know, as if he hadn't heard his share of them in his time, the dumb arse, and then finally, "So I guess you're under arrest." He made a motion at George. "Hook him up, pal."

George stood there shaking his head.

The little fat man glared back at them. His eyes, which had flown open when Zeke opened the door, now seemed to withdraw cautiously into his face. Or maybe what it was his head was swelling up from being tied to the bar. One or the other.

The fat man said, "What is this? You two ain't cops. I can *smell* a cop. You couldn't hook me up if you wanted to, you don't even have any cuffs."

"You . . . uh . . . didn't bring cuffs?" Zeke asked George. George shook his head. "Well," Zeke said, "that isn't really a problem. We don't need cuffs

the way they got you hog-tied to that bar there, pal . . .”

Zeke was about to say more, but George figured he'd said enough. He reached past Zeke and gently closed the closet door on the guy.

“What’s going on here tonight?” he asked Zeke.

Zeke looked at him.

“I dunno what’s going on here tonight, bro. It was supposed to be a ordinary drop night for the loaners, just like I told you, the loaners coming in, the money bagged up. I don’t unnerstand it any more than you do.”

Suddenly there was one hell of a thumping. A racket they could hear out in the street. The guy in the closet kicking the door. Zeke pulled the door open and stepped on the guy’s foot, saying in a reasonable tone, “Don’t do that, okay?,” the fat guy howling as Zeke closed the door on him again.

George stood thinking.

“Something just occurred to me. Maybe Ma was right. Maybe we’re not the only ones who knew what the Big Guy was up to in here, and maybe we’re not the only ones who planned a hit on him tonight.” He frowned. “That guy on the couch—” George nodded at the corpse “—what I’d like to know, is there any chance at all he

could be the Big Guy, you think?”

“I dunno, bro.”

“You don’t have any idea what he looks like?”

Zeke looked doubtful. “Well. Like I told you, I never really seen him before, I only heard about him. But I guess it’s possible. I mean, I suppose he *could* be. I mean, if you’re expecting to find—you know—a *big guy*, well then . . .”

“You know what?” George said, suddenly realizing something. “We forgot to put the stockings over our heads.”

Zeke looked at him.

“Hell,” he said.

He opened the closet.

“Who are you, pal?”

The little fat guy was hopping up and down and making the coat hangers ring. “You busted my foot, you didn’t have to go an’ do that, you—”

“Who are you?”

“I’m a cop!” the fat guy snapped.

“You sure?”

“Why not? If you can be a cop, I can be a cop!”

“And the big stiff on the couch? Where does he fit in? Is he a cop, too? Or is he the owner of this place or just what?”

The fat guy didn’t seem to comprehend. He blinked his eyes a few times.

“Look. Whoever you guys are, untie me. Let me out of

here, and then maybe I'll tell you what you want to know."

"Oh yeah?" Zeke said. "Hang on a second."

He closed the door.

"Tell you what," he said to George, "could be the closet man here really is a cop." As George began raising his eyebrows at the suggestion, Zeke said quickly, "No, listen. I know what you're gonna say. Cops always travel in twos, like nuns, but I dunno, I just kinda got this feelin' about him."

"What are you talking about?" George breathed. "If the guy is a cop—" he jerked his head at the closet door—"then why isn't he telling us cop-type things? You know, hollering, reading us the riot act, and coming on really officiallike?"

"Maybe—I dunno—because he don't want us to take him too seriously?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he's undercover. Or no, here's what it is, he's on the take. Listen. I think I know. What could of happened, he came here tonight to get his cut and walked into the middle of a hit. Or maybe," Zeke suggested, getting into it now, "after the loaners left, he decided to lean on the Big Guy for more grease. And the Big Guy, which we see now lyin' here with his toes up, he don't like

the idea, so Closet Man pops him."

"You've got an overactive imagination," George said.

"At least I got an imagination."

"It doesn't tell me how he got in the closet, though, does it?"

"Well, there coulda been other guys here, too, only they left."

Zeke opened the closet door and they both took a good long look this time at the little fat man in the blue suit. They took a real good long look.

"If you really are a cop," Zeke said, shaking his grizzled head at the fat man, "and if you're really on the take, then I got to tell you, I'm disappointed. It kinda shakes a guy's faith in law an' order, pal. Faith in the good guys."

"Are you gonna let me out of here?" the fat guy asked.

"Depends. You know what happened to the money, pal?"

"What money?"

"The money the loaners brought in tonight."

"You know about that?"

"Sure, I know about that. I'm askin' you, ain't I?"

"Yeah, well, I don't know anything about it."

"Now why did I think you were going to say that?"

"And why do I think you should mind your own business?"

Zeke took a patient, deep breath and looked at him. "Ain't that necktie a little tight?" Peering closer at the knot. "I'd bet, I mean it looks to me that thing could tighten up even more when your legs start to give out in—say—five or six more hours."

"Five or six hours! What're you talking about?"

Zeke said to George, "He don't know what I'm talkin' about."

"That's too bad," George said.

"Yeah, that too bad."

"What *are* you talking about?" George asked.

"What I'm talkin' about, bro, is what'll happen when we close this closet door on this guy, back the way we found it, an' walk outa here an' mind our own business like he told us to. He could be stuck in there—I don't know—weeks."

For the first time it looked as though the little fat man was going to break out in a sweat. He'd been remarkably contained up to this time, all things considered. But now his forehead wrinkled, his face got redder, and he shifted on his feet, making the coat hangers ring some more.

"Wait a minute! Fellas! Listen! Let's not get in too big a hurry here—"

"Why would we get in a hurry," Zeke said, "standin'

around here in a private office with a dead guy beside us on the couch. I dunno why that should make us wanna get in a hurry, do you?"

"Dead guy?" The fat man seemed puzzled. "You mean . . ."

"The Big Guy," Zeke said, "is who I'm talkin' about. Lying right here on the couch where somebody plugged him." He hooded his eyes at the fat man. "I can see why *you'd* wanna be in a hurry, pal, this bein' a messy situation for a cop on the take to be in, somebody gettin' the drop on you an' that stiff left lyin' around." Zeke lowered his voice. "Hey, you can tell me. How long you been on the take, anyway?"

"Me? *Me* on the take?" The little guy looked as if he was going to swell up even more and float right off the floor when Zeke said that. He danced around. "*Me* on the take?" he said. "*Me?*"

There was a lot going around in Bodan Tom's head all of a sudden. Trying to cobble it all together. These two yo-yos—the younger one more reasonable, a not too bad-looking a guy, but the older one sloppy, unshaven, with boots on his feet that looked like they were worn down to forty-five degree angles at the sides, one of

which he had stomped on Bodan Tom's poor aching toes with—who were these men? Where had they come from? And what were they trying to tell him? That Funk, the big dope, was still here? That he'd staggered away and croaked out there on Bodan's couch? Why did the big dumb cop have to go and do that for? And if he ever managed to get out of this closet, what the hell was Bodan going to do with him?

One thing he knew, he couldn't depend on his kid brother bailing him out. No telling where that Romeo was. Bodan had to get unhitched from this goddamn clothes bar before some real cops showed up or he strangled to death.

"Okay," he said, "whatever you say. You're right, I'm a cop. And yeah, I'm on the take. That what you wanna hear? Now are you gonna cut me loose from this bar?"

"Whaddya think?" the sloppy one said, consulting his pal. "Should we cut him loose?" Then he said to Bodan, "One thing, though—you're gonna hafta show us where the dough is stashed."

"Deal," Bodan said, wondering himself where in the hell the night deposit bag had got to. "Now you guys cut me down from here, okay?"

They undid the knot.

When the necktie went loose, Bodan's legs began to tremble, and then shake, and then they gave out on him altogether, letting his pudgy body slump to the floor.

"We're waitin'," said the sloppy one.

They kept their eyes on Bodan as he dragged himself painfully across the floor to the desk. They didn't escort Bodan. They didn't move to see what he was reaching for. They really were amateurs. Bodan pulled open a bottom drawer and took out the Smith and Wesson .38 revolver, rolled away from the desk, and aimed it at them, thinking, that Funk—telling Bodan Tom he ought to get a bigger gun. What? Did he think a guy wearing a beautiful handmade suit like this was going to carry a weapon the size of a hair dryer under his arm?

"Oh, man," the sloppy one said, looking at the gun, "didn't you know he'd try something like this on us, bro? I mean, don't you think you should of gone over there with him and helped him open that desk? Jeez!"

"That's right. It's my fault," the younger one said. "You were standing right there closer, you could of gone with him, but it's my fault."

These two guys arguing. Couple of idiots.

"I don't know what you guys should of done," Bodan told them—boy, his legs ached—"but I know what you're gonna do now. You're gonna stand right there while I make a phone call. Then you're gonna wait till a friend of mine gets here. Then you're gonna go for a ride with that dummy lying there on the couch—just like in the movies—and when they find the three of you, it's going to look like you got into one terrific argument and—"

Bodan caught only a glimpse of the squat shape stepping through the door into his peripheral vision, a shape that was blurred, its features distorted, before something collided with the side of his head, and it was funny, he couldn't be certain, but he thought vaguely that the thing that connected with him could have been a purse. . . .

George and Zeke got the little fat guy cinched up to the bar in the closet again, Zeke supporting the guy's dead weight under the armpits while George took care of the knot. Zeke stood back panting with his pouchy face flushed as George shut the closet door. "Man, but that's one heavy lit-

tle goober, I'm tellin' you that for nothin'."

"Something new," Ma said, "you doin' somethin' for nothin'. You never do nothin' for nothin'. You'd want twenny dollars to show up at a funeral."

"I'd pay twenny dollars to show up at *your* funeral," Zeke growled, but keeping his voice low and muffled so Ma couldn't quite hear. Talking up, he said, "The Closet Man there, I guess he isn't a cop. He knew where that gun was. He must be the Big Guy."

"Who's the other one, then?" George asked.

Zeke bent over the couch and flipped the dead guy's sports coat open. "Take a look." George edged closer. There was a half-open thumb-break paddle holster on the hip of the big man's thin dress belt, and a SIG P228 nestled in it. "Not police reg issue, that setup," Zeke said, "but then I guess the guy wasn't either." He poked at some cuffs. "Nice set of Smiths."

Ma stood by the desk, a square, mannish figure with features blurred by the fine mesh of the stocking she had pulled over her face. Her sweater was twisted off center, and her dress was rucked up at the side. She had one ghostly pale ankle showing where she'd



pulled off one of her knee-highs so she could snug it down over her head.

"Ma," George said, "you look terrible."

"What he's saying, you should maybe take the stocking off your face," Zeke told her, "you look like something from *Star Trek*—I dunno—a Ny-lonian."

"You're the next generation, not me, God help us all," Ma told him. But she pulled the nylon off. "So what're we doin' here?"

"Takin' a last look around," Zeke said.

"What're we lookin' for?"

"Never mind."

"Suits me. If you're gonna be like that, you can go an' get stuffed."

You couldn't haul Zeke out of the place with a winch until he was ready, George knew. You had to stand back and let the guy go for it, there was nothing you could do. Old Zeke desperate to find that money now, looking everywhere. Looking in places he had already looked in, and then coming back and looking there again.

George suddenly noticed Ma was busy, too.

"What you doing there, Ma?"

"Just lookin'."

On her knees with her big rear end jutting out, patting down the edges of the couch un-

der the dead guy, jamming her hands under the cushions and going in deep, right up to the elbow.

"If Zeke don't want my help, that's his business. But the Lord helps those who help themselves, an' I'll just tell you somethin'. I found six bits already, in this sofa, which is prob'ly all I'm gonna get outa this deal, time you weasels get through screwin' it up." George noticed she'd already pulled a slipcover off one of the cushions and had it stuffed with loot, the green shade of the brass banker's lamp from the desk sticking out, and some other bulges in there, filling it up.

Zeke turned around and realized it, too.

"Ma, we ain't gonna take that stuff. You crazy? That's a dead guy there. You see him? It's nuts cartin' all kinds of stuff away that might connect us with this place."

She glared at him.

"This just in. You call me crazy one more time, I'll pull your lips off. I notice *you're* cartin' something away—or you're *fixing* to—if you ever find it, which I doubt."

Listening to all this, George brought his hands up to his face and held them there. But only for a minute. There was an outbreak of noise downstairs. Somebody had come into the

club. A voice yelling, "Bo! You up there, Bo? It's Joseph, your favorite brother!"

Closet Man started hammering on the door again.

Moonlight gleamed on the chute of the incinerator, press-braked metal that dropped straight down the wall in a shaft at the rear of the building. Heading out the back way, they now found themselves outside on a structure that was like a long iron porch bolted to the brick like some sort of a fire escape, only it was being used more as a storage area, the main aisle practically choked with junk. Zeke going, "I just can't figure it out. He must have some kinda secret hiding place for his dough in there. You know, like it could be he stashes it under a floorboard . . ."

"I'd like to stash you under a floorboard," Ma said. "Nail you in there good."

"Can we be quiet?" George was fed up with them. "There's somebody in the building, for God's sake. We aren't out of the woods yet, and—"

There was a clunk from behind, then a gasp of pain. Ma stumbling into something. And then Ma cussing and grunting, and then brief silence followed by a tremendous crash in the alley below them.

"Goddamn barbecue," Ma said. "You can't have them things on a balcony, it's against the fire regulations."

It was too much. Ma hurling barbecues off balconies while George and Zeke were going out of their way to be quiet. Zeke whirled and tried to go for her. He tried to get past George, but George blocked him, George holding him back, Zeke yelling, "Lemme go! Are you gonna let me go?" And then Zeke stiffened in George's arms, saying "Hey! Wait! Look! She brought that bag with her after all, damn it!" Turning, George saw it was true. Ma had her loot bag with her, ignoring their warnings. She'd been last to come out of the room, and they hadn't seen what she was up to. "Gimme that!" Zeke yelled, lunging.

Zeke got a piece of the bag, jerked the whole thing out of Ma's hands, and blundered away with it, kicking junk out of his path, oblivious to the noise—an old bike, a stack of Pepsi cases—it all went flying, Zeke pressing closer to the wall of the building and the yawning maw of the incinerator chute.

"See this, Ma? See this?" he hollered.

He slung the bag into the chute.

They heard it drop. Muffled thumpings, then far below a bang. And then silence.

They stood there a minute.

"You weasels owe me a lamp," Ma told them.

"So there I was," Ma was saying, "trapped in the goddamn can, I coulda been locked in there for weeks, I coulda *starved* to death for all you weasels cared. First they turned the *light* off on me! You never told me that! How they'd turn the *light* off on me? I must of panicked. Grabbed for the latch an' that tiny little knob what locks the door broke off, an' I goes, okay. This is it. Those two yahoos have really done it to me this time. If I get outa here alive, I'm gonna go straight to church an' thank God for sparing me, then go home an' strangle those no-good weasels—"

They were safe at home now, in Ma's kitchen.

"So how'd you get out?" George asked, cutting her off right there.

"How'd I get out? *How'd I get out?* How d'you *think* I got out, for the love of all that's holy. I hadda *climb* out, that's how I got out! Just like I said might happen. Go over the wall. An' I'm panicking, right? I got a stocking pulled over my face in

case the Rottweiler man shows up, an' if that ain't bad enough, it's so dark in there you can't see your hand in front of your face—"

"Why would you want to, Ma? See your hand in front of your face?"

"It's an expression! An *expression*! Don't you even know a civilized expression when you hear one?"

"I guess I never understood that particular one, that's all." Then George said, "So what you were saying, before you got locked in the can, you had to leave the other room early because they wouldn't serve you. They said they were closing up. So what happened to my twenty dollars then, Ma?"

Ma looked away.

"What twenny dollars?"

"Ma," George said, "you know what twenty dollars. The twenty I gave you so you could buy yourself an appetizer."

"You didn't give me no twenny, you bum."

"But, Ma, I did, I—"

Ma raising her voice at him now.

"You sure as hell did not! What're you tryin' to pull on me anyway?"

At the time George had been trying to get Ma to cooperate, but he'd known Ma would try something like this, Ma never remembering when you gave

her money, only remembering when you didn't give her money. Her own weird form of selective memory or something.

He looked to Zeke for support, but Zeke wasn't saying much. The minute they'd walked into the house, the guy making a beeline for the kitchen and Ma's Beefeater forty-ouncer, helping himself to two strong quick ones which he tossed back right there on the spot, then pouring a taller, settling-in-for-a-period-of-grief sort of drink and dropping down into a chair and letting his head sag forward. He'd been sitting there like that for a while, and now he finally spoke out loud.

"Goddamn, it coulda worked."

"Only it didn't," Ma reminded him.

"It coulda worked perfectly," Zeke said, ignoring her, "If the Big Guy—and Closet Man—if they hadn't decided to mix it up. An' if the money'd been there where it was s'posed to be. An' if somebody hadn't of come in the front door that Ma was supposed to be watching. An' if *George hadda listened to me in the first place.*"

"And if pigs could fly," Ma said, "we could get bacon with shotguns."

"Maybe," George said, "what the real problem was, you should of scoped the place out

properly like you said you were going to do."

"I did scope it out. I scoped it out plenty. How was I s'posed to know all that other stuff was gonna happen? I don't have a crystal ball, you know. I don't have a psychic mind."

"You don't have any kind of a mind," Ma said. "All you got is a soft squishy spot where your brain used to be."

There was one saving grace from George's perspective—at least the gin was working. Zeke letting Ma reach in past his guard and take her shots, and not responding or coming on the counterattack right away. But George had to agree with Ma this time. She was right about Zeke's mind. It was still back at the Gas Station. Part of it, anyway. Which didn't leave him a whole lot to work with.

"A bit of luck's all I needed. The money was there. I know it was there. Where else would it be? But I'm not psychic. I looked everywhere, but I couldn't seem to find that goddamn bag."

"If you'd looked everywhere," Ma pointed out to him, "you'd of found it, wouldn't you?" She squinched up her eyes at him. "What'd the thing look like?"

"Canvas, Ma," George told her. "Most likely a canvas sack with lettering on the sides and

some kind of a lock on the thing."

"Oh," Ma said, nodding. "That."

There was a silence. Zeke slowly lifted his head and fixed his eyes on her.

"Whaddya mean 'that'?"

"Well," Ma answered, "there was a bag looked like that. I seen it."

"What?"

Zeke coming to full attention there in his chair.

"Sure. You'd of seen it, too, if you'd looked. It was after I found that nice lamp, some nice coasters, a clock. Then, when I was feelin' down the cushions to try an' pick out the loose change, that's when I seen it. A canvas bag. It was under the guy on the couch. Partway scrunched. I guess he fell on it."

Zeke's mouth opened a few times with a dry clicking sound while he worked out the ramifications of this. Which in his case took a certain amount of time. No hurrying him up. When he got like this, it was like trying to get through to someone in the afterworld, you felt like you had to link hands and burn incense or something to encourage the dope. Finally a tiny inner switch must have toggled because Zeke put down his drink and stood up.

"Bro," he said heavily, "if Ma ain't stringin' us a line, we just

gotta take a chance an' go back there, bro. You wait in the car, that's all you gotta do, an' I'll deke in back in that place through a window for half a sec, an' . . ."

"But naturally it isn't there now," Ma said.

This last bit of intelligence hit Zeke hard. Ma tagging this statement on the end of it all got him up on the tips of his toes with his grizzled jaw clenched and his eyes on fire.

"What're you *talkin'* about, Ma?"

"If you'd shut up for ten seconds maybe you'd find out, wouldn't you? Are you ready to listen? Fine. I seen the bag there—only of course I didn't know what it was you were lookin' for exactly 'cause you wouldn't tell me nothing, remember? Keepin' it to yourself, some big hairy secret. One corner of a canvas bag stickin' outa the couch. So . . . I took it."

Zeke looked like the victim of a stun grenade. Dense as he was, even he could tell where this was leading. Not getting ready to holler any more. Only dazed. Almost whispering this time.

"You took the night deposit bag, Ma?"

"That's right."

"You took the night deposit out of the room, an' you . . ."

"Whatever it was," Ma said, "some bag, I took it. But I couldn't open it. Like George says, it was locked. So what I did, I put it in the sack with the rest of the stuff that I'd collected. In that slipcover bag."

Zeke stood there for a few more seconds, then slowly crumbled. All the fight went out of him. His hopes, his expectations, all of those positive emotions seemed to sink down into him while a heavy glaze spread slowly over his eyes, this guy remembering the way he'd refused to tell Ma what he was looking for, remembering the crash of the barbecue hitting the lane, remembering how he had behaved toward her, finally losing it and tearing the bulging slipcover out of Ma's hands and whacking it into the chute.

Ma said, "See, nobody would tell me anything. It's really dumb. When you stop an' think about it, it was me found the bag you were lookin' for. An' it was me saved you from the little fat jahoobie, too."

Finally Zeke managed to whisper something. Directing his comment at George.

"I'm holdin' you personally responsible for this."

"Yeah," George said, "I thought you might."

"Personally responsible. I told you from day one. I told you from the word go. I *warned* you this would happen."

"At least," Ma said, "you can't be mad at *me*." Smug, and satisfied, and pleased with herself. "Next time," she said, "maybe you should have some faith. I'm your ma, after all. You weasels."

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# The Notes of Morrow's Horn

by Stephen Wasylyk

**L**egends, it is said, are merely topics of conversation that fall somewhere between folklore and witches' tales. You believe them or you don't, so feel free to decide about this one. The mystery that goes with it is real, however, and can be attested to by the people present when it came to light.

Thirty-odd years ago, I was living in a too-small apartment with my wife Judy and three-year-old son Matthew. A month away from my law degree, I was looking forward to finally earning a salary instead of scraping by on a small inheritance and a few dollars from Judy's part-time job. The only question was where.

The answer came one spring evening. The small, thin man at the door had bushy, iron-gray hair, prominent ears, and a nose too large for his thin face. The dark pinstriped suit screamed *attorney*, backed by hard eyes you wouldn't want to look into from a witness stand. His smile, however, made you forget all that.

His name was Gerald Tobias, he said, and he'd been given my name by one of my professors as someone who might be interested in what he had to offer.

Interested? If I'd had a red velvet runner, I'd have unrolled it before him. Fifteen minutes later, after reassuring an apologetic Judy he understood the disorder of the apartment, he was settled in our one worn easy chair, a sleeper-clad Matthew in his lap.

He was from a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania, where he'd built a substantial practice. He was a widower, had lost a son in Korea. Another son was in Denver. He'd reached the point where, as he put it, he'd rather do more fishing than lawyering, but didn't simply want to close the doors and walk away when the right man could take over in a year or so. Far better than struggling in my own office until I was established. But perhaps not better than joining a major law firm in Philadelphia or New York where I could earn big money eventually, which, according to the professor who'd given him my name, I was capable of doing.

Personally, he'd always felt there was no point to accumulating more money than he'd need to live comfortably, do what he wanted





THE LAST NOTES HUNG QUIVERING. WE HAD NO TROUBLE SEEING EACH OTHER CLEARLY IN THE MOONLIGHT.

*Illustration by Laurie Davis*

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to do, and buy what he wanted to buy. Billionaire, pauper, or somewhere in between, we all ended in the same place, our accomplishments indicated only by the size of our tombstone. Since none of us ended in a position to admire it, what was the point? Some things were far more important than money.

If I wasn't interested, he'd understand. If I was—he'd looked at Judy and smiled—if *we* were, he suggested we spend a weekend with him. He had a large house and a housekeeper-cook who came in during the day. We could look the town over and go through the house we'd live in. Since he owned it, there would be no rent, but we'd be responsible for maintenance and taxes. He stroked Matthew's hair and casually mentioned that it had a rather large back yard for a boy to play in.

A real house? With a back yard? Judy's eyes lit up. The town would absolutely have to be the tail end of the universe to lose her vote. She'd had enough of struggling up and down apartment house steps with a stroller and a toddler, and if we settled in a city, she'd have several more years of it before we could afford to buy.

Gerald Tobias was a great lawyer. He had no talent at all for description.

The town was a jewel, nestled in a fold of the mountains with a river running through the center. The tallest building in the business district was only ten stories, the courthouse massive granite, almost all the houses single family; the whole thing sparkling below you when the road crested the mountain and curved downward. The only jarring note was to the northeast where a small steel mill producing highly specialized products belched smoke.

Our house was a surprise: a low stone rancher as far removed from the Tobias'es' gingerbread Victorian wood frame as several generations can get. His "rather large back yard" turned out to be more than a half acre.

The inhabitants were a typically diverse mixture of ethnic groups, religions, social classes, and color—with the usual quota of successes and failures, honest people and criminals, adulterers, alcoholics, and religious and ethnic bigots, all with the usual range of sexual preferences.

After we'd settled in, I learned that everyone called Gerald Tobias, "Mr.," and when he spoke, everyone listened. A judgeship at any level had always been his for the asking, and terming his practice "substantial" was a considerable understatement. He was

counsel for the steel mill, almost every large business in town, and most of the prominent families. Remarkably, he'd taken on no partners nor added staff until I came along. He employed only two middle-aged women, one as receptionist, the other as legal secretary, who knew more law than I did. I blinked when I saw that their salaries were higher than anything a good many of my classmates expected to earn for several years until I realized, why not? They were the reason he didn't need any assistants.

It was obvious he could have merged with another firm. Any would have given him anything he wanted. He could have also gradually scaled down the practice without any financial penalty to himself or the two women, letting the other attorneys compete for the clients he'd given up. He had, instead, gone out of his way to bring me in.

One reason he was so respected was that he never pulled his punches. If you didn't want an honest answer, you didn't ask. Nevertheless, I had to know, so I stuck my neck out one evening.

"Why me?"

He smiled. "Curiosity. I've always felt that a life is simply a road with tollbooths along the way. Eventually you reach one where you can't meet the price, so you're shunted to a side road. Or you continue until you reach one where you consider the price too steep. Either way, each of us determines how far we go."

"And you want to see where I get off."

He smiled again. "If I live that long."

**H**e'd never turned down a client because of ability to pay, so not all his clients could be termed fat cats. No client was more important than another, but the huge retainer said that if one had to occupy that position, it would be Ian Farr.

Farr owned the steel mill—lock, stock, and barrel—which made him twice as wealthy as the next man on the list. And wealth equates with power.

I first met him while having lunch with Tobias. He was about ten years older than I was—I'd floundered around for four before deciding I wanted to be a lawyer—a solid two hundred twenty pounds on a five ten frame, thick-necked, square-faced, with a powerful handshake and eyes that evaluated and dismissed me in seconds, which didn't bother me at all. I'd run into many of his clones in school. They came from monied families and had assured

futures, dismissing you as destined for drawing up wills for people whose assets were a house and one CD.

Handled exclusively by Tobias, but the day would come when Tobias would say, he's yours to have and to hold. If you can. Having seen the retainer, I sure as hell wanted to. Having met him, I was equally sure I didn't. Arrogance had always irritated the hell out of me.

After he'd gone, Tobias said, "Not a very pleasant man. Takes getting used to."

I didn't say I thought that day would never come for me.

But a small town has a very structured society where dislikes and even hate are concealed by smiles, and Tobias's presence at any social function was mandatory, whether the hostess liked him or not. As his associate and eventual successor, I fell into the same category, which made "better-look-this-guy-and-his-wife-over" invitations equally mandatory. A hostess always likes to know how far away to seat you at some future dinner party.

That was why Judy, Matthew, and I pulled up in front of the Farr home one warm fall afternoon. Just as some invitations were necessary in the interest of communal harmony, so was their acceptance.

The house was a two story fieldstone; wings and a columned portico with wide steps had been added to the original square box, the driveway circling around a small grove of trees. You'd have to drive a long way to find another as fine.

A maid led us through a polished hallway to a flagstone patio, complete with furniture, that overlooked the river. A tailored lawn sloped to a carefully planned and structured garden of blooming fall flowers. Below, the river sparkled in the sun as it split around a fingerlike island where the brilliance of autumn color dappled the green of the pines.

The introductions were naturally pleasant.

Rachel Farr was slender and long-legged, had honey colored hair pulled close around her head, darker eyebrows, an oval face, a slant to her blue eyes, a slightly Roman curve to her nose, and somewhat thin lips, all perched on a long, graceful neck.

She was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen.

The warmth in her eyes and the sincere welcome in her voice said she was nothing like her husband. Her family had been in the valley long before the Farris crossed the mountains. Some people who had reason to be arrogant weren't.

She brought over a girl perhaps six months younger than Matthew, who would undoubtedly grow up to be at least as beautiful as her mother.

"This is Alyssa," she said, positioning her before Matthew.

Alyssa regarded him stolidly for a moment before punching him in the chest.

Matthew hadn't yet forgotten the lessons learned in a public playground. He pushed her, dumping her on the seat of her pants.

Judy's voice was soft but full of menace. "*Ma-a-a-thew!*"

Alyssa didn't cry. She sat looking up at Matthew. He toddled around behind her, clasped his hands around her chest, and hauled her to her feet. Hand in hand they took off toward the miniature playground at the side.

"Looks like love at first sight," said Rachel dryly.

Ian's face said she was the only Farr who thought so.

The wives strolled off to look at the garden. If any relationship developed here, it would be one in which the wives were friends but the husbands only tolerated each other.

Farr thrust a drink in my hand.

"Beautiful view," I said.

He lifted his glass toward the island. "Except for that. Or I should say, what's on it."

I couldn't see anything on it except trees. I said so.

"Tobias hasn't told you? I'm not surprised. I count it as one of his failures. A man named Henry Morrow owns it. I want him off. Tobias says it can't be done. Legally, that is."

"Then he's probably right. Why do you want Morrow off?"

"Because that goddamn trumpet he plays irritates me."

Henry Morrow must have one helluva pair of lungs, I thought.

"That island is what—a half mile away?"

He handed me a pair of field glasses.

Focusing them on the island, I picked up a rowboat pulled up on shore and tied to a tree.

"He rows over," he said.

"Why in the world would he want to do that?"

"To serenade my wife."

I was beginning to be amused. I glanced up at the house to see if there was a balcony.

"A trumpet is hardly the instrument of choice for a romantic serenade."

"You've never heard him play," he muttered.

"Well, trumpet or not, it's a problem that can be solved easily. He comes over onto your property—"

"Tobias got an order barring him from my side of the river. Morrow ignores it."

"And you and Tobias let him get away with that?"

He refilled his glass almost angrily. "There are other considerations. Let Tobias tell you what they are."

"Well, contrary to growing opinion, the law can't solve every problem. How does Rachel feel about the serenading?"

He hesitated as if reluctant to reveal a family disagreement. "She considers it entertaining. Flattering to a woman, I suppose."

The trumpet as an instrument of romance still intrigued me. "What does he play?"

"Nothing anyone would recognize."

I almost smiled. "This is some sort of test, isn't it?"

"In a way. Since neither of us has an answer, we thought you might."

I did smile. "All right. I'll talk to Tobias. In the meantime you can use ear plugs."

"It isn't funny," he said coldly.

He didn't have to tell me that. Push people like him far enough, and he'd solve the problem in his own way, regardless of consequences. I would guess that so far, only the influence of Rachel and Tobias had kept him from committing mayhem on the person of Henry Morrow. I certainly didn't want to end up in court defending him on a manslaughter charge, even though, given who he was, he'd probably get off. But Morrow would be dead.

"Don't assume I can't understand how annoying it must be. Do you think he'll be here tonight?"

"I'd bet on it."

"Then, if you don't mind, I'd like to come back and hear it for myself. Perhaps talk to him."

He shrugged. "Talking to him is a waste of time."

We carted Matthew off in spite of his wailing that he wanted to play with 'Lyssa. He was asleep before we left the driveway.

"Rachel's nice," said Judy.

"Not to mention so beautiful that she has an admirer who serenades her with a trumpet every night and whose devotion is likely to get him shot."

She sighed. "Now, why can't I have one of those?"

"Might be because while you are also beautiful, you ain't rich."  
"I knew I was flawed in some way. What is it all about?"

I told her.

"Well, if you talk to him tonight, see if he can find some time for me. After taking care of a toddler and a house, *and* the laundry, *and* the shopping and cooking, any hardworking housewife could do with a romantic serenade to end the day, even on a trumpet."

I pulled into our driveway, turned off the engine, and sat for a moment. "We're laughing, but has it occurred to you that the situation has the makings of a tragedy?"

"Has it occurred to you that laughter is often used to chase away frightening thoughts?"

I drove back at midnight after calling Tobias to ask why it was so difficult for the most powerful man in town to get rid of a trumpet player who annoyed him.

So Tobias explained.

Morrow had arrived three years ago, a member of a tune-in, turn-on, drop-out contingent of acid heads who had taken up residence in the woods. That hadn't spoken well of their thought processes, but then those had probably been burned out before they arrived. Not that maintaining a year-round back-to-nature commune in this climate was impossible. Native Americans had done it for thousands of years before being pushed out by the settlers, but they had never enjoyed the benefits of indoor plumbing and central heating. The contingent disappeared at the first sign of frost.

Except Morrow. He'd met Rachel. When and where wasn't clear. To stay and woo the object of his passion, he needed employment and a place to live; otherwise he'd have been loaded aboard the first outbound Greyhound bus.

He found both easily. He'd dropped out of the Curtis Institute where he'd been studying trumpet, a tragedy according to the people there whom Tobias had contacted. Morrow was a musical genius. Very little demand for a talented trumpet player in a small town without a symphony or anything else classical, and rock and roll demanded guitarists and keyboard specialists.

However, although Morrow had been trained in the strict structure of the classical, there are some musicians to whom playing any type of music is as natural as breathing. And, being gifted, they inject their own interpretations and add their own embellish-



ments, no matter what they are playing.

The town, like many others, had a large proportion of Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Czechs, and other ethnics who took second place to none when it came to having a good time at a dance.

So when he wandered into one clutching his trumpet and sat in with the polka band, the audience recognized musical genius when they heard it. They didn't care who the tall man with the long blond hair and beard, wearing the worn, torn clothing, was. They didn't care where he'd come from or what he thought of society. They didn't care what substances he ingested for his pleasure. What they did care about was that when he lifted that trumpet to his lips, an average accordion player was suddenly inspired, a mediocre drummer acquired an extra arm, the floor shook, the walls trembled, and the roof threatened to cave in.

And their spirits soared, which is what music is supposed to do for people.

"Guess where they work," said Tobias.

"Farr's steel plant, of course. Almost everyone does. Are you telling me they'll go on strike if he leans on Morrow?"

"That would be a contract violation. What they'll do is invoke every comma and period in every clause. Very legal but very detrimental to production."

"Farr says Morrow owns the island. Since when does a societal dropout acquire property?"

"Evidently when he's lovestruck. The island was formed during a flood a great many years ago and simply grew. Morrow mooned around over Rachel for more than a year before he discovered no one owned it, so he homesteaded it under a law that hadn't been used around here for more than a century. All he had to do was file a claim, build a home, and till the soil, three requirements that were the foundation of many of today's large farms. So there he was on her doorstep. The serenading started last spring, along with several heavy-handed arrests, a peace bond, and the restraining order. But as I told you, Farr can't step on him too hard, even if I were to permit it, without paying a heavy price. So far, I've managed to keep him in line, but—"

"I know. One of these days he's going to erupt."

"Exactly. Now, I don't want you to think that your future here depends on finding a solution, but I will point out that if you do you will have very little to worry about."

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I arrived at the Farr home a little after midnight, Judy's "Be careful. You know how unstable these flakes can be," ringing in my ears.

They could also be very meek and mild, floating somewhere in intergalactic space.

I found Farr and Rachel on the patio. The autumn night had acquired a chill, the full moon so bright I could distinguish houses on the far shore.

It was as though an unseen conductor had been awaiting my arrival to lower his baton. The opening notes drifted up from the riverbank, gentle ripples of sound that gradually grew in volume. The silvery sound of a solitary trumpet, yet behind it you could almost hear the accompaniment of a full symphony.

When it came to music, I was somewhere in the center of the "generally ignorant" category, but listening to Henry Morrow was like walking into an art museum and being confronted by an obvious masterpiece. He was pouring out something pure and shining from his very core, and the beauty that emerged had Rachel mesmerized, her lips parted and her eyes dreamy.

She wasn't being presented with the customary bouquet of roses. He was handing her a world full of orchids, wrapped in moonbeams and sprinkled with stars, but riding under that beauty was the primitive call of a male to his mate.

Farr was dealing with a Pied Piper of love, romance, and ecstasy, and he had to be thinking of the age-old method of handling a predator—shotgun. If Morrow was allowed to continue, the night could well come when Rachel couldn't resist that call.

The notes were still drifting toward us when I started down the slope to a barrier of shrubbery and a break leading to a short flight of flagstone steps to the riverbank.

The last notes hung quivering. The tall figure lowered the trumpet and passed a hand over his lips. We had no trouble seeing each other clearly in the moonlight. I could swear his eyes glowed with an inner light.

"You must be that new lawyer," he said. "Didn't the old man tell you there was nothing you could do?"

"Don't be smug, Henry. Sometimes we ordinary mortals possess enormous power."

"You can't throw me off the island, and you can't stop me from playing."

"I'd never want to silence someone with your talent, but I do prefer you do it elsewhere. I'll tell you why. Let's forget that if you keep it up Farr will surely shoot you. If you're allowed to go on, you'll destroy something fine and good in that house. And for what? For a little while, she'll be up there with you, but no high lasts. She'll crash, and when she does, she'll find that everything really important to her is gone. If you want to try floating through life ten feet off the ground, that's your business, but you have no right to take her with you."

"You can't stop me, man. No one can stop me."

I sat on a flagstone step. "You're not invulnerable, Henry. We all have our weaknesses. Yours is music."

"Music is my strength."

"Not *bad* music. Let me tell you what I'm going to do if you don't leave. I'm going to install speakers pointed at your island. Then I'm going feed the worst music I can find through those speakers. Off-key, distorted, slowed down, speeded up. Music that even a tone-deaf cretin couldn't stand. Music that is fingernails drawn across a blackboard. In five minutes, your hands will be over your ears. In ten, you'll be twitching. In fifteen, the furthest thing from your mind will be playing your trumpet ever again. In twenty, you'll swimming for the far shore. And even if I'm wrong, even if you're not all that sensitive, you'll still have to put away your horn because no one will be able to hear a note you blow into it."

He loomed over me menacingly. "Lawyers have no heart."

"We turn it in when they hand us the sheepskin, Henry. Now in fairness, I'll point out that you probably could get a restraining order, but Farr will pay no more attention to that than you did. It's what's known as the-shoe-on-the-other-foot maneuver. You want to serenade my client, I'll serenade you. So, what do you think? Do we have the basis for an agreement?"

Both hands lifted the trumpet above his head, the words a moan of frustration. "I love her, damn you!"

I looked up at him. He didn't appear to be high on anything more than passion, but that wouldn't lessen my pain if that trumpet bounced off my skull. "No one who has heard you play can doubt that, but you came along about ten years too late."

The trembling trumpet shimmered in the moonlight like a headsman's axe about to descend.

"I have a hard head, Henry. Hit me, and that trumpet becomes trash. That's no way to treat a fine instrument. I will also smash

you in the mouth so hard, your talented lips will become permanent scar tissue. On top of that you go to jail. Sit down and let's talk."

He lowered the trumpet slowly and joined me, placing it between his feet and holding his head in his hands.

He moaned. "You got no pity in you, man."

We talked for a half hour. I've never pled a case so passionately and eloquently in my life.

I finished with, "Listen very carefully, Henry. Love is doing what is best for her, and the best thing you can do is go."

He spread his hands in despair. "Where?"

"If I were you, I'd head for the nearest recording studio. You have a great gift. Don't confine it to playing moonlight serenades and polkas when you can make thousands of women happy because they'll think you're playing just for them."

The night chill was getting to me. I rose stiffly. "Just go, Henry. Don't sit around waiting for a miracle. When you can't win, you settle for a draw. Just hitch up your jeans and get the hell out. You won't be the only man who had to walk away from the woman he loved."

His voice broke in grief. "One . . . last . . . time?"

No one could have denied him that. "Fair enough. I'll enjoy hearing it."

I did. So did Rachel. I saw the tears. Farr didn't. You don't lose a world full of orchids wrapped in moonbeams and sprinkled with stars every day.

He was gone the next day. I simply smiled when Farr asked how I'd done it, but naturally, that relationship solidified. He might not like me, but respect was more important. I'd seen that in Tobias.

A year later, Henry sent me an album from New York. When I played it, Judy sat there with glazed eyes. I suspect she plays it even today when I'm not around.

I also suspect Henry sent one to Rachel, who also played it when Ian wasn't around. Like thousands of other women who felt Henry was playing only for them. It proves, I suppose, that when it comes to the language of love, the message is more important than the medium.

He cut only two albums. Both became collector's items when someone emptied a .38 in him one night, supposedly a stocky man seen by an apartment house neighbor. The news sent a ripple of sadness through the town, but whatever Rachel felt, she kept it

to herself. Exposing your innermost feelings had yet to become fashionable. As far as I know, Ian said nothing.

Several of Henry's friends wanted him buried on his island, but the town wouldn't permit it. He ended with the Presbyterians on the far side of the river.

Two years later, they found Tobias sitting alongside a creek in the hills with his fishing pole in his hand and smiling. The number of black limos in the funeral procession must have created a shortage elsewhere.

Judy, Matthew, and I miss him to this day.

Several drinks too many and an icy road took Ian Farr three winters after that. The drinks were understandable. The steel industry was going under, and so was his plant. The buildings are now abandoned shells. The town died with it, like so many others built around steel. Still pretty from afar, but up close, the death wounds gape unhealed.

The main street is potholed, storefronts boarded, houses abandoned. Young people are missing; the old ones wear the stunned faces of someone sandbagged from behind. Those who left and came back can't believe what they see.

Not too many years afterward, Alyssa spent six months holding her mother's hand and caring for her as she wasted away from one of those tumors that, caught early, late, or in between, kill a person anyway.

**W**hen Judy, Matthew, and I first arrived, we had driven up on curving, two-lane blacktops only the locals use now. The state finally—finally—finished an interstate that nips across the north end in a long curve. The exit ramp for the town, as luck would have it, intruded into the Farr family plot in a corner of the cemetery. Not small, that plot. It contained two hundred years of Farrants. The state wanted to move the affected graves elsewhere, splitting up the family.

Fortunately, Alyssa's father-in-law is a good lawyer. And not without influence.

I made them purchase additional land and convert the plot into a triangle that would follow the curve, moving the graves that were in the way into the new area so that all those Farrants remained together.

On the crisp fall day they were doing that, I got a call to hurry on out there.

A very nervous cemetery manager met me, trailed by a man I took to be the crew foreman. The manager was new, his predecessor having joined his erstwhile charges a year ago.

"My first thought was to keep quiet," he said, "but there are six men here. One would be sure to say something that would get back to you as the family's attorney, and I don't want to be held responsible for something not my fault."

He led me to the scene of a disaster, explaining as we went.

Ian had already been relocated. The small crane moving Rachel's coffin hadn't raised it quite high enough. It struck a small granite outcrop and slipped from the chains. Landing on its corner had sprung the lid open when it hit the ground.

"Swear to God," the foreman said, "it was only a little bump."

That was a guilty conscience speaking. Once locked, coffins do not open easily. It would never do to have a corpse spilled into the street if the pallbearers should somehow drop one.

That, however, wasn't important at the moment.

What *was* important was that the silk and satin interior was empty, so pristine it appeared never to have been occupied.

I'd helped carry that coffin to the site on a rainy morning through the wet grass and slippery mud. Heavy as it was, we'd never have missed the slight weight of Rachel's wasted body. And Rachel, who had been a beautiful woman but no more vain than any other, had asked that the coffin remain closed.

The cemetery manager had the drawn look of a man envisioning a huge lawsuit.

I kept my face impassive. "It's all right. There was a private cremation ceremony. The burial was only symbolic."

They both looked relieved, particularly the manager. It sounded so good, I almost believed it myself.

I walked away and sat down on the weathered headstone of a Farr who had crossed the mountains before there was a town, fumbling with a trembling hand for the occasional cigarette I was driven to when life whistled a fastball past my stupid head.

Grave markers of every size and shape were aligned beneath a canopy of fall color, leaves already drifting to earth. In a few weeks they would form a blanket six inches deep. I'd just consigned Ian Farr to an eternity under that blanket with an empty grave beside him, without the slightest clue to where his wife really was.

Perhaps the peace and quiet helped me think of chance meetings, and of momentary madness, and how we all reach Tobias's toll-

booth where the price is too high.

And of Alyssa's long hours holding her mother's hand while waiting for her to die, of secrets whispered in a dim room, of the soul cleansed in anticipation of death, and of inbred duty and obligation.

And that no one will know until Judgment Day what dark secrets are interred in any cemetery.

One more would make no difference at all.

I killed the cigarette and glanced at my watch. Just enough time to avoid Judy's anger. We had to drive to Philadelphia that night. Concert pianist, our daughter-in-law. Appearing at the Academy of Music.

I let the car roll down the narrow, curving macadam lane to Henry's grave, not very far away, noticing for the first time how an expanse of smooth grass alongside his marker broke the symmetry of the aligned tombstones.

The words of a local detective came back. "Six rounds? Someone sure wanted to make a point, didn't he?"

Henry had become a legend here—the longhaired flake who lived on the island and played a polka trumpet like no one before or since, and serenaded the woman he loved by moonlight with the most beautiful music you ever heard—music you still might hear on a silvery fall evening when the moon is bright.

Skeptics say if you do hear it it's because someone is playing one of his albums on a hundred-watt hi-fi stereo.

Maybe so. I do know I hear it occasionally. Lawyers being notoriously unimaginative, perhaps I'm only recalling a distant memory.

I don't think so. I remember Henry's playing as being infinitely sad and full of longing, but since Rachel died—

Well, it seems to have acquired a triumphant lilt.



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# A Boy Named Tzu

by Ken Lester

**H**ildegarde Beauregarde was an anile retentive. That is, she was an old miser. Her golden years she hoarded no less tightly than her gold, enjoying each day in the mansion where she had been born, a central Florida cracker within sound of Lake Wales's carillon bells, savoring her parochial tintinnabulation much as a cockney his Bow Bells of London.

Grandson Jack was a penal implant. That is, he was a jailbird. Had been. Only briefly, really. For of his two-to-six at Eglin Federal Prison Camp for securities violations he had served only ninety days, and that, as tennis groundskeeper. It was some technical foul sort of thing about junk bonds. Grandma thought he had vacationed in the Bahamas. A sunlamp reinforced Jack's tan and his story.

Jack needed money bad. True, in his present digs he could watch the sun rise over the Atlantic and set in the Gulf, but the solar transit vaulted eponymous gas stations. He lived up over a candy store.

What's worse, he played his tennis on rundown sandy courts with raggedy nets. He even had to bring his own center strap.

Jack needed money bad enough to need Hildegarde dead.

Not that he *wanted* her dead. He really liked the old girl. But money and dead were synonyms in Jack's lexicon. For Jack was the sole surviving heir to the Beauregarde millions.

No blood kin of Hildegarde, Jack was her step-grandson. She had raised him ever since the day the St. Elmo's headmaster had haled him out of geography class to tell him his father and his stepmother—Hildegarde's daughter—had lost an argument with wind shear on the final at pre-Doppler Tampa International.

"When I go, Jack," said Hildegarde, "you will be a very wealthy man."

"Thank you, Grandmother," said Jack.

What Jack did not say was, "I would rather be a very wealthy young man than a very

wealthy old man." But this preference had set Jack to thinking just how and when he might get his druthers.

Enter a boy named Tzu. Jack's classmate at Eglin Federal Prison Camp had borrowed his name from quaint sixth century B.C. philosopher Lao Tzu, the good old boy who urged mankind to go with the flow.

"Tzu sounds better than Irving in my business," said Tzu.

Tzu sold charisma. As one hawked tomatoes from a roadstand, Tzu flogged charisma from an ashram.

"I sock these marks a thousand a week to attend my Carolina retreat, Low Tor. For this they get to mop the johns and lie on the floor moaning through one nostril. They love it."

And they loved Tzu. Which amour was not actionable per se. But when Tzu's Rolls-Royces outnumbered his parishioners, the friendly folks at the Internal Revenue Service opined that a tax exempt religion Tzu was not, and how about chipping in for this fiscal year and that one, and the one—millions! Which of course by now were one with the snows of yesteryear.

"I run a clean operation," said Tzu.

"True," agreed the IRS, running its finger along Tzu's immaculate second set of books. No dust. But in the Examiner's Treasury of the World's Greatest Audits, cleanliness was still second best to godliness. The slammer it was. Two to six. Time off for good.

Tzu and Jack had emerged blinking into the blinding sun of Florida freedom hand in hand.

And mind in mind about murder.

"What will it take?" said Jack. "The dead thing." He had tended to thing-talk like that ever since President Bush.

"Time, my son," said Tzu. Younger than Jack, Tzu affected a full beard and granny glasses that gave him an unearned gravitas. Tzu could read the telephone directory soft and slow, and people would nod sagely.

Tzu knew more about the subtle seduction of ideas when he was three years old than Jack would know in all his life. Tzu just knew.

He knew exactly who would pay good money for no-guilt-because-no-sin. Who would flee from the black-or-white of Aristotle's binary assumptions to the comforting greys of fuzzy logic. Tzu brewed cream-of-faith stew, and the devout lapped it up.

"I must meet this granny," said Tzu.

"What the hell for?" said Jack. "We're talking homicide here."

"Would you expect a doctor to cure a patient he had never seen?"

"You've got a point," said Jack.

"Besides, I could use a good meal," said Tzu. "The IRS..."

"You're telling me!" said Jack.

They made it to Grandmother's house just in time for angst-giving dinner.

"We've had chicken fricassee with dumplings at this table every Sunday since I was a girl," said Hildegard. Past brunch, it was a three-ish lunch-dinner.

"Dumplings, Mr. Tzu?"

"I've had two."

"Three," corrected Jack.

"I'm sorry you missed services at my little church," said Hildegard. "We are small, but..."

"Wherever two or three shall gather," said Tzu, counting his blessings and parishioners more accurately than his dumplings.

"And your congregation, Mr. Tzu?"

"Pope John Paul II is the spiritual leader of about a billion souls, give or take a sinner," said Tzu. "Which leaves

the rest of us to compete for market share of the remaining four billion."

"But how do you fund your mission?"

"Not by Mother's Day flower sales, car-window washes, nor yet ham raffles."

"I see," said Hildegard. She always saw more than you might think. Especially to look at her. Birdlike, but no hummingbird, no peacock, she was a sturdy little jenny wren, not given to the megrims, vapors, or fantods.

"I like certainty in life," she would muse. "Mr. Beauregard wore both suspenders and a belt."

Hildegard particularly disliked perfumed pullouts in her reading matter. "I like *Vanity Fair* well enough," she would sniff. "But if dear Mr. Condé Nast were alive today, I would tell him I'm damned if I'll read a magazine that smells better than I do."

Hildegard chose that moment to slip a sliver of white meat to the cuddly shih tzu puppy at her feet. It was then, too, that a cascade of sounding brass brought baroque order to Hildegard and her flock of two.

"On cue," said Hildegard.

Fifty-seven Bok Tower Carillon bells assured Polk County taxpayers that "Sheep May

Safely Graze"; not, however, in their citrus groves, thank you, no matter what Johann Sebastian Bach may have had in mind.

"Towers lift up the eyes, bells lift up the heart," said Jack, grazing safely on the words of some long dead carillonneur.

"I am a founding Friend of Bok Tower Gardens," said Hildegard.

"Any perks?" asked Tzu.

"Oh yes," said Hildegard. "I use the library, the studio, the elevator . . ."

" . . . with what you pay them, Grandmother, they ought to let you stand on top of the tower like a muezzin and summon the faithful to prayer."

"I do that, too," said Hildegard. "I climb the ladder all the way to the top. Nobody knows but Salazar."

"Salazar?" said Tzu.

"The old Spanish gentleman, the custodian, I guess, over here from a long line of grandees back in Castile."

"He's not a Castilian; he doesn't lisp," said Jack.

"Salazar stopped assibilating his c's and z's into interdental th's the day he came to America," said Hildegard. "When in Rome."

"He's still a wetback from Chihuahua, dodging *la migra*," said Jack.

"He's getting his green work card," said Hildegard. "Besides, he is most kind to me. And that's that."

"Mustn't teach grandmother how to suck eggs," murmured Tzu.

"Tell me more of your work at the ashram, Mr. Tzu."

And tell her he did, in spades and with gestures, that Sunday and several more, until Jack became restive.

"Dammit, Tzu, she's got the hots for you!"

"Tepids, Jack. Old persons get the tepids."

"Whatever!"

"She's really into meditation, Jack. Of course, a good mantra is hard to find, but I've got her chanting 'Om Shanti' in her search for peace."

"She should live so long. Yin me no yangs, Tzu. We've got work to do, remember?"

"Lighten up, Jack," said Tzu. "You're too young to have a midlife crisis."

"So I got a head start. Get on the stick, Tzu. We're just killing time."

There was never a question of who would do what. That had been negotiated back in the slammer.

Tzu was no good with his mitts. He was the kind of guy who, if he played the French horn, would get his fist stuck in it just at the crescendo.

Jack, on the other hand, was tactile as all get out. He instinctively felt the serrations on dimes and quarters unseen in his change pocket, never, never confusing them with unmilled pennies and nickels. Not that he thought about these things. He just fingered things that way automatically, like turning a screw cap softly to its detent, then backing it off and torquing tight as he pleased, but only just. For the Air Force he had lifted his aircraft off the runway as Saint-Exupéry had bid, "... like culling a flower."

So guess who got elected to do the dirty work? Tzu.

Jack was to provide the means, not yet chosen.

"What do I do? Walk into Brooks Brothers Tampa and say, 'I'd like something tasteful in Kevlar for my SWAT team. Perhaps a nipped-in tattersall vest ...'"

"...you're watching too much TV ..."

"...and the gun? How do I get *that*? 'If you have touch-tone, push 2. If you want a Magnum, push 357-BANG. Have your credit card handy, and our bonded uniformed messenger will ...' Tzu, it isn't gonna be easy!"

"No guns," said Tzu. "And stop quoting John Wayne."

"How about a sure-fire investment?"

"No arson," said Tzu.

Jack parked his Jeep on a side street near Jackson's Giant Mall. Red and green neon said, "If we don't have it, you don't need it."

"How do I kill thee? Let me count the ways," said Jack.

Blunt instrument.

*Ace Hardware.* Is there an Ace Software? Hammer. Two, for good measure. I'm always losing tools. Worse, I lend them. Like my leafblower to Willie next door that time. Where the hell else *could* he blow his leaves but back on me? Better make those ball peen hammers. Both ends blunt instruments. That's twenty-six seventy plus six percent Florida sales tax, sir. Visa? No, that's cash, thank you.

Poison.

*Walgreen Drug.* The pharmacist has a clip-on bow tie and acne, but he's no dummy. Percodan? Sorry, sir, that's by prescription only. Yes, even if your personal physician is Jack Ke-vorkian. Regroup. What do I know about poppy and mandragora and all the drowsy syrups of the world? Think. So what if I can't buy a little deadly? How about a lot of real sick? That's it! Let's hear it for OD; she'll overdose on sleeping pills. OD and DOA. Murder by acronym, as told to Agatha

Christie. Dependent? No way. Accident? Yes. But, a hundred five-grain caplets? Who's counting. Better make that two bottles, please. Miles to go before I sleep. No, I won't be needing that discount coupon entitling me to . . . Thank you, sir.

Sharp object.

*Schrecker Cutlery.* Can this be the lovely and talented Miss Schrecker herself who caveat emptors, 'Stainless can be hard to sharpen and may not hold an edge.' Wonder when she gets off work. Later, later. I couldn't care less about edge. Point is what I have in mind. This twelve-inch chef's knife looks like a winner. Yes, I see it has a full tang and three rivets in that cocobolo handle. Imported, you say? Solingen, Sabatier, Damascus and Company. Cold steel, warm heart. En garde, Hildegarde! What's that again? A rocking motion for dicing? I see. Well, that's certainly grist for the mill, Miss Schrecker, but I really don't plan to do all that much rocking and dicing. What kind of man does she think I am? I mean, really! On sale this week. Lucky me. Thirty-three sixty including tax? Thank you, ma'am.

Rope.

Shop till she drops. Scrub that last transmission.

*Hackenfuss Hiking.* Climbing gear for your discriminat-

ing mountaineer. And for not a few of your upscale homicides, I'm guessing. This same specification nylon climbed with Hillary and Tenzing on Everest? Support your neighborhood Sherpa. Will I be needing pitons and carabiners to go with that? No, I'm not with the Sierra Club's impending assault on K2, but how flattering of you to think so. Frankly, I have something more local in mind. Would she believe a Louix XIV rock-crystal chandelier suitable for hanging? Ah yes, your little booklet on knots, Miss Hackenfuss. Like the name of the rose, my knot merit badge is all that remains of Boy Scout Troop Sixteen: the running bowline, sheepshank, the whole nine yards. Bet she'd leap out of her L'eggs if she knew I spiritually swap low-calorie, foolproof noose recipes with hanging Judge Roy Bean, the law west of the Pecos. Yes, your standard hundred-foot hank will do. And I'll have more than enough left over to jump double Dutch.

"All yours, Tzu." Jack dumped his knapsackful of deadly intent on Tzu's bamboo glasstop.

"So much?"

"Clausewitz learned it at Waterloo."



"Total war was before my time."

"Overkill—the only way to go."

"But which?"

"Your call. I'm off."

"Oh?"

"My week with the Flying Club's Cessna." Jack flipped Tzu a scrap of paper scribbled with a telephone 292 prefix code: Key West.

"So call me," said Jack, and would not stay for an answer.

Jack was doing the Stingray Shuffle when the call came through.

"Jack! *Larga distancia. Un hombre.*"

What a rack on that callipygian Carlotta! And what a way to have passed the week.

"Coming, Carlotta."

Stingrays fear you more than you fear them. But if you step on one, flat there and sand-buried, he'll get you every time. So you shuffle when you walk in the surf. That way the stingray knows you're coming and scoots.

Jack paused at the lapping water's edge, facing the scraggly sea grape and sea oats that anchored the sand. Here I am, he smiled, one foot arguably in the Gulf of Mexico, the other in the Florida Straits arm of the Atlantic, bestriding the peninsula like a cut-rate Colossus.

Nor was the salty ambivalence lost on him, of wishing his cash cow dead but unable to pull a trigger or guide a blade himself. He shrugged and trotted into the tin-roofed lanai, hopping hard on his left heel to clear his telephone ear.

"*Gracias.*" Jack took the phone from Carlotta, pinched her rump, and eyebrowed her out of the room.

"Yes, Tzu."

"*Mutatis mutandis.*"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Damned if I know, Jack. But my guru used to say *Mutatis mutandis* whenever we had a done deal."

"Hildegarde. She's . . . ?"

"She's," said Tzu.

The Cessna hopscotched up the eighty-second meridian, her compass bracketing zero like a coursing hound as Jack flat-hatted the Gulf for the first eighty miles.

Jack squinted at the salt spray on the Plexiglass windscreen and saw himself through the misty scrim of years. He remembered his mother saying, "His hair is so fine—like silk," and guests would smile and nod. Upon which Jack would do the only thing any human could do. He would try to grow more, finer hair right there at that very in-

stant, feeling that if what he already had brought him such distinction, more of that same cash crop would corner the market in adulation. And he had been trying to please and feel good ever since, but had wised up to the fact that hair no longer did it for him.

"Money," said Jack as he clipped a mangrove and goosed the Cessna up to thirty-five hundred over the looming scrubby land. "Money answereth all things," assured Ecclesiastes.

Naples and Fort Myers sliding past the left wing. Look out for the Air Force boys from MacDill on their low-level runs. They still do that? Hell of a thing to mess up now. Off to the right, who but a farmer would name a town Frostproof? Time to find the strip and start down. There. Dead ahead. Thoughtfully provided by the tony Chalet Suzanne for its ritzy clientele. Now power down, and straight in on the skimpy strip. Windsock limp, ignoring little puffs from the north. Big orange sun cutting the horizon under the left wing like a slice of orange on an old-fashioned. Back, back on the wheel. This old tail-dragger keeps you honest; stall it in. Men from the boys.

Jack greased it on and taxied over to the faithful, waiting Tzu.

"Don't tell me yet," yelled Jack as he killed the engine.

Tzu helped Jack put the plane to bed, chocks and tie-downs. Then they strode in silence across the lawn and basket-weave brick patio to the Chalet Suzanne, Jack a step ahead.

"No, not the bar," said Jack.

A wrought-iron glass-topped table overlooked the pond from an alcove. No big-eared bartender. The waitress brought the scotch and left.

"Tell me."

"Damndest thing," said Tzu.

"How?"

"She bought it this morning. From the Bok Tower."

"Jesus, that's a big first step!"

"Two hundred feet, at last count."

"She flew farther than Orville Wright at Kill Devil."

"And without the usual mechanical aids," said Tzu.

"Why would she do a thing like that?"

"She thought she could make it."

"Come on!"

"On the wings of a small spineless cactus, native to the Rio Grande valley."

"Peyote!"

"The magic buttons of Chihuahua," said Tzu.

"Then she was happy?"

"All smiles."

"I'm glad. I liked Hildegard."

"Bystanders report she chanted, 'Om Shanti' all the way down."

"Just twice, I'm guessing, in three seconds."

"Not, however, slowly and reverently as I taught her."

"You'll live it down."

"She landed on a roseate spoonbill, just missing the moat that might have saved her. But her copilot survived."

"Copilot?"

"Hildegard clutched her shih tzu puppy right up to touchdown."

"Any landing you walk away from is a good landing."

"The shih tzu made a good landing—on Hildegard."

"So did you, Tzu."

"But I never laid a glove on her!"

"Nevertheless . . ."

"I wasn't even there."

"No matter." Jack was already feeling his oats. Several million oats. "It happened on your watch. Even with an assist from the Hemlock Society, you'll still get yours."

"Thanks."

"Read any good wills lately?" muttered Jack as the waitress brought refills to the quietly smiling couple.

The twelve-year-old-scotch drinkers drank twelve-hour-old toasts.

"To the quick," said Jack.

"And the dead," said Tzu.

Attorney Hamilton Bostwick cleared his throat. With his sense of the dramatic, that could have been an all-day job. Since attorneys are officers of the court, so was he now of Polk County Surrogate, no less for being in his own sunny, wood-paneled office with Jack and several legal cronies. He then spoke in that plummy, back-of-the-throat, button-down voice you often hear in travelogues describing glacier-trapped woolly mammoths.

"Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither."

"Amen," said Jack. Leave it to old Bostwick to class things up with a little *King Lear* in a regimental striped tie.

A common housefly droned comfortingly about the pleasant room practicing touch-and-go landings on various of the personnel, and Jack flew with it, musing what to do with his loot.

... a little *pied-à-terre* in Monaco, the Côte d'Azur and all that . . . so central . . . so tax-free . . . hobnob with the Grimaldis . . . ski lodge a must . . . not Aspen—passé . . . perhaps Whitefish, Montana . . . the old Chet Huntley ranch. . . And, hey, for the theater and

museums in New York, a bachelor pad at Central Park West not too far from Lincoln Center . . . can be small, but must be chic . . . maybe the Dakota if you can live with the Lennon thing. . . . First off, get your ass out of that dump over the candy store . . . move into Hildegard's old place, spruce it up, a pool, tennis courts . . .

"Hildegard was sadly ill," said Attorney Hamilton Bostwick.

"How sadly?" said Jack.

"Terminal."

"News to me," said Jack.

"News to her."

"When did she know?" Jack felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. Most hominids do not keep in day-to-day touch with their erectile napes.

"The day she saw Doc Forbush," said Attorney Hamilton Bostwick.

"And that was?"

"The same day last week she visited me in this office," Attorney Hamilton Bostwick waved a fond proprietary hand at the corpus juris lining his walls, "and dictated this will."

Jack smoothed the back of his neck with his left hand.

"I, Hildegard Beauregard, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, and considering the uncertainty of this life . . ."

Attorney Hamilton Bostwick garrumphed at "uncertainty."

Jack liked the sound of "disposing."

" . . . do make, publish, and declare this to be my last will and testament as follows, hereby revoking all other former wills by me at any time made.' "

Jack went into free fall at "revoking." This was no codicil. This was a whole new ball game!

"Long story short . . ." wheezed Attorney Hamilton Bostwick.

That's a first, thought Jack.

" . . . Hildegard left almost everything to a charity . . ."

Jack closed his eyes just in time to catch the world premiere of coming attractions on the wide screen of his retinas. A life flashed before him—not his own, but that of Hildegard's favorite, St. Francis of Assisi. But surely Jack would star! "Roll the credits." No joy. A sympathetic cameo role of an impoverished brother monk. "Coming soon to a theater near you."

" . . . a group doing business as The Irving Foundation. . . ."

A.k.a. Judas Iscariot, thought Jack. There goes the Côte d'Azur and ski lodge.

" . . . still trying to reach them in North Carolina . . ."

Even the roof over my head, much less the Dakota pad, thought Jack. There has to be something . . .

Attorney Hamilton Bostwick garrumphed and fiddled and jabbed one last item with his glasses.

"I will paraphrase Hildegarde's final instructions to me. They concern her step-grandson whom she was always at great pains to refer to as 'Dear Jack.'"

Aha! Jack's heart leaped. Paydirt! The grandmother lode.

"Hildegard instructed me to provide sufficient funds . . ."

Attorney Hamilton Bostwick paused, and with his breast pocket kerchief patted the corners of his eyes. He seemed about to blot further but must have dammed the freshet upstream, for he stuffed his kerchief back into his pocket.

"She felt very strongly about this bequest, quoting from the Bible, 'The fox has his hole, and the birds of the air their nest, but the son of man hath not where to lay his head.'"

Jack lowered his eyes modestly to his cordovan loafers.

"Therefore she instructed me to provide 'Dear Jack' sufficient funds to construct a cosy dwelling . . ."

Attorney Hamilton Bostwick could contain himself no longer. He blew his nose.

"... for the shih tzu puppy she hereby bequeaths to him."

Jack saw right then that his shoes could do with a shine.

"And she gave me to understand that her taste ran to a simple post-and-lintel construction with perhaps a mansard roof, all not to exceed a ballpark figure of one hundred dollars."

"Game," said Jack, "set and match," noting that he would still play tennis on public courts, not his own private Grasstex. "Thank God I saved my center strap."

Tzu is back in business. Thanks to Hildegard's cash transfusion, he's almost legit. His ashram nestles on a little hill—Low Tor—where the Piedmont Plateau gives on to the Carolina Coastal Plain.

Flowing water is one Eastern model for being. So it is that Tzu's faithful puree their fungible hopes and fears, even as the nearby New Hope Reservoir spills into the Cape Fear River; thence to wind, as hopes and fears have ever wound, to a salty, teary sea. Even Tzu's real estate has metaphor.

"From here you walk, Jack," said the taxi driver, depositing him at the mouth of the gravel driveway to Low Tor. Jack tipped him extra for name recognition before remembering

that some taxi drivers call everybody Jack. And an extra dollar for putting up with the shih tzu puppy.

"Heel," said Jack.

Dotting the ashram's lush but neat lawn—sheep may safely graze, but they crop close—Jack saw huge painted plaster statues of Siva, Moses, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others.

"Hedge your bets," muttered Jack as he broke the electronic beam and strode through the opening gate.

"Welcome to Low Tor," said the color-coded receptionist in golden robes and matching hair. From behind her desk smiled a hundred square feet of Kodachrome swami Tzu.

"Grainy but deductible," said Jack.

There was no missing Tzu, known to retreating penitents as "Gurutzu," for his image kaleidoscoped from wall to wall to computer to cash register at the reception desk.

Jack shuffled along into a glass-walled, marble-floored pavilion where hundreds of softly-chanting, shining-faced celebrants queued for an audience with Gurutzu. He sat crosslegged on a silk pillow on a Lucite throne. He wore a scarlet robe. A favored few devotees he struck with a long peacock feather as they crawled past.

Tzu said, "You bring the little shih tzu."

"A small thing, but mine own," said Jack, drawing himself up to full legatee stature.

The little dog wagged its tail in warm greeting of Tzu, then leaped upon the Lucite throne and established its even warmer territoriality upon the holy man's left ankle.

"Sweets to the sweet," said Jack.

"Blessings on you, too," said Tzu, touching Jack's shoulder with his peacock feather.

None could tell from Tzu's face what he thought. In the first place, none could see through that beard, and the glasses Tzu wore were the kind that vary with light. Actually, he was mentally inventorying his Rolls-Royces, so perhaps the electrochromatic granny glasses darkened as his eyes lit up.

A swarthy figure swathed in saffron edged from behind the Lucite throne to stand at Tzu's right hand.

"This is Salazar," said Tzu.

"I remember Salazar," said Jack. "He's the Bok Tower guy."

"Was."

"And now?"

"Now he's legal, with his green card and all. He does odd jobs for me."

"I know one," said Jack to Tzu.

But to his entire estate, which at this moment lay on

his right foot in hot pursuit of a flea—an unearned increment of his legacy—Jack could say only, "Now he tells me."

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### **SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

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Carl and Julia Rampy are the guilty pair who stranded their companions on Illi Isle.

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HUSBAND	WIFE	STATE	PROFESSION
Adam Potts	Karen	Utah	florist
Bert Mundt	Helen	S. Carolina	contractor
Carl Rampy	Julia	Wisconsin	banker
Dan North	Greta	Texas	dentist
Earl Orson	Laura	Tennessee	auditor
Fred Queen	Ilene	Virginia	editor

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# Dead in the Water

by Nancy Bartholomew

**O**ne of the things I hate most about Sunday mornings is opening up the Bait and Tackle Shop for Freddy. On those Sundays when he's out fishing, hoping to finally get good enough to turn pro, I get stuck with the shop. Oh, don't get me wrong, I'd do most anything for Freddy. I saw him through his divorce, didn't I?

After I unlock the door, cut off the alarm, and turn on the lights, it's time to clean out the bait tank. I gotta grab the net and scoop out the floaters who didn't make it through the night.

There they are, bodies distended, eyes glazed over, swirling around the surface. I pick each slimy minnow up and toss it in the trash. The fish stink. Maybe it's fish fear. All those minnows, swimming in a tank, waiting to be used as bait, they gotta be scared. I know, you're saying they can't think like humans. Maybe not, but fish are mighty smart, else they wouldn't be so dang hard to catch. Just look at all the lures and plastic worms we sell.

Even with the best equipment, you gotta have technique. Fishing's a skill. So tell me them fish ain't smart.

On this one particular Sunday morning, I set the coffeepot on to brew and headed for the back where we keep the live bait. I figured the hot coffee would be a reward for cleaning the fish tanks. By the time I finished, the coffee would be ready. There can never be too much coffee at six A.M. on Sunday morning.

I flung open the back room door, reached around for the switch, and started screaming. There, floating in a tank full of reddish water, was Freddy's ex-wife, EAUDELEIN. Her hair was fanned out around what had been the back of her head. It was now a bloody mess. I stared and screamed, turned and ran to the tiny bathroom, and heaved into the commode. I was shaking and crying, "Oh my God, oh my God." There wasn't a soul to hear me. I hadn't even switched on the "Open" sign yet.

I ran back out to the front, around behind the counter, and

grabbed the phone. For a moment I couldn't remember how to dial 911.

"Oh Jesus, God," I screamed into the phone. "Get somebody over here quick. EAUDELEIN'S dead."

There's only two cop cars in all of Barrow, and they both raced into the parking lot with lights flashing and sirens screaming. They don't get many chances to use their lights around here. I don't believe Wallace County had ever had a killing, at least not as long as I'd been there and that was all of my forty-five years.

Randall Vaughn was the first one to get to me. He was the duty officer. Raydeen Miller came a close second. She wasn't on duty but keeps the police band on all night in her bedroom. She don't like to miss much. This was just the kind of situation she'd been waiting for all of her professional life.

"Patsy," called Randy, "you all right? What's this about EAUDELEIN bein' dead?" He was a comforting presence as he reached out to touch my shoulder. Randy'd been on the force for years; we all knew him, of course. He and I'd been in school together, and even dated briefly in high school.

I finally got it all out, how I'd found EAUDELEIN in the bait tanks. As soon as I told him,

he and Raydeen headed for the bait room.

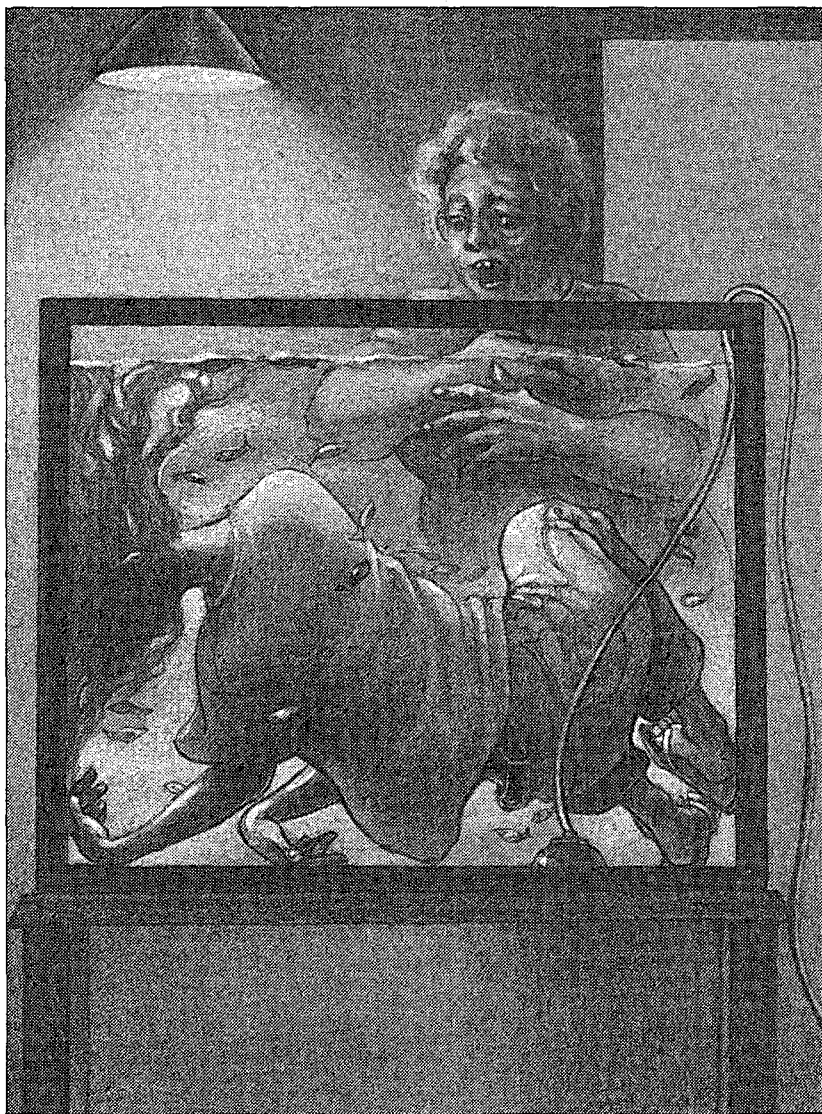
"Oh my God," breathed Raydeen, turning white. Randy, also looking quite pale, said, "Don't anybody touch anything. I guess I gotta call the crime lab and get them to send out a mobile unit." Wallace County isn't big enough to have its own lab.

The next couple of hours became a blur of activity. The state boys arrived and started taking pictures, fingerprinting everything, including me. Then, after the medical examiner arrived, they hauled EAUDELEIN out of the water.

Randy and one of the investigators from the State Crime Unit, Detective Mertis, made me tell them the whole story, in detail, over and over. They wanted to know who had keys to the store. I said I did and so did Freddy, of course, and Hank, Freddy's partner. There were a couple of part-timers who had keys, Willie Smith and Jim Roy Learner.

"Did EAUDELEIN have a key?" asked Randy.

"I really don't know," I said. "I doubt it, since she and Freddy are divorced. Maybe she still had a key, but I can't imagine her coming in here." She and Freddy hated each other.



'I FLUNG OPEN THE BACK ROOM DOOR, REACHED AROUND FOR THE SWITCH,  
AND STARTED SCREAMING.

*Illustration by Judy Mitchell*

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"Where was Freddy last night?" asked Randy. Detective Mertis looked curious.

"You know, Randy, he was with me. We saw you at Blockbuster Video last night. We rented a video, went home, and watched it, then we went to bed around ten. Freddy got up around three A.M. so he could go fishing. The large mouth were supposed to be biting, and he's gettin' in as much time on the water as he can before the Bass Master Classic. He's tryin' to turn pro," I said in an aside to Mertis.

Randy and Detective Mertis exchanged a long look; then Mertis asked, "Where is Freddy now?" He spoke in a still, flat voice. It was my first indication that Freddy was a suspect. Later, looking back, I could follow his reasoning. But hearing the words come from him, in Freddy's shop, with EAUDELEIN lying on a piece of black plastic in the bait room, sent shivers down my spine. They didn't believe me. I'm about as trustworthy as they come. I don't look like a liar. Hell, sometimes I wish I did, but I look more like your mama. I'm plump and short, with a fresh-scrubbed complexion and pink cheeks. My hair went grey years ago. Give me a ribbon-racked apron and I could be Betty Crocker. I drive their children to school in

one of the four schoolbuses that Wallace County owns. If they couldn't trust me, who could they trust?

No, they thought Freddy had somehow gotten EAUDELEIN to meet him at the shop and murdered her. My Freddy may have hated EAUDELEIN, but he would never have killed the mother of his daughter, no matter how evil she'd treated him.

Raydeen put the word out on the police radio she carried that we were looking for Freddy. Detective Mertis held a low-toned conference with Randy. Randy shot a few worried looks in my direction, then wrote a few more things in his notebook.

Around nine, Freddy and Hank came tearing up to the store in Hank's old pickup. Freddy rushed through the door. "Patsy, I just heard. Are you all right?" Surely, I thought, Detective Mertis could tell, just from meeting my Freddy, that he was no killer. But that wasn't the case.

"Fred, I'm afraid we're going to need to ask you to come down to the station with us," said Randy. He didn't say he was sorry, or talk to Freddy like they'd known each other for years. He was Randall Vaughn, Wallace County sheriff. And Freddy was a prime suspect in a murder investigation.

They didn't tell me or Hank to come to the station. They just took Hank's prints and asked him where he'd been last night. When he said fishin', they didn't say anything about *him* coming down there. Of course, he hadn't been married to EAUDELEIN, but it was the principle of the thing.

As Randy was leading Freddy to the patrol car, Freddy stopped dead in his tracks and whirled around. "Oh my Lord," he cried. "What about Loretta? Does she know?" No one had thought to go to Freddy's daughter. "Babe, I hate to ask you, but would you find her? Someone's gonna have to tell her about her mama." I quickly figured out that the someone was me.

What else could I say but "Sure, hon, don't worry. I'll go get her and bring her back to our place."

Freddy and I weren't married. Yet. Freddy'd gotten taken in the divorce. Things were so tight financially that he just couldn't see getting married. He said he didn't want to marry me with so much debt hanging over his head. If you ask me, I think EAUDELEIN burned him so bad he was afraid of its happening again. So, against the town's better judgment, 'cause you know

they judged everybody, I let Freddy move in.

He'd been such a pitiful wreck when we met. Although we both grew up in Barrow, he'd been a few years ahead of me in school and left to join the army as soon as he graduated. Freddy was a Baptist and I belonged to the Methodist church, so our paths never crossed until I stopped in the store to buy bait. Fishin' was gonna be my new hobby, and Freddy was only too happy to help me find a tackle box.

His divorce had only been final a few months, and he was bitter. He couldn't cook, didn't care to, and lived like a prisoner in his tiny apartment. When we began dating, all that changed.

We'd been living together for almost ten months, and in that time Freddy'd come around pretty well. He liked my fried chicken and creamed potatoes, and he'd put on about fifteen pounds. He'd made himself a little workshop in my shed out back and had even joined the softball league. But we didn't talk about marrying any more. I felt that was best left to time.

Loretta, his fifteen-year-old daughter, had been the one thorn in the side of our relationship. She was a dark-haired, sullen child who took after her mother in looks and



attitude. Loretta saw me as the Other Woman, standing between her parents and reconciliation. No amount of talking on Freddy's part could persuade her otherwise. She tolerated me and rarely spent the night at our house. Of course, EAUDELEIN had a lot to do with that. She poisoned the child's mind. She told Loretta that Freddy had started seeing me long before he and EAUDELEIN separated. That was flat not true. Freddy was living on his own when I met him.

I was going to have trouble with Loretta, I just knew it.

When I pulled up in front of EAUDELEIN's house, there were cars parked in the driveway. Folks would have known that Loretta was alone, with no one to break the news to her. It wasn't their place, however, to come tromping over and interfere. It was just going to make my job harder.

As I walked up the path, I could hear Loretta wailing. She'd been close to her mother, but this was the wail of someone milking it for all it was worth.

Loretta's aunt, Minnie, EAUDELEIN's oldest sister, was sitting on the sofa, patting Loretta's hand. Tears streamed down both their faces, and a little group of busybodies stood around looking helpless.

They were not glad to see me, but Minnie was at least civil. She only asked, "What are you doin' here?" instead of "What are you doin' here, bitch?"

"Freddy was worried about Loretta. He asked me to come over and make sure she was all right. He's down at the station, helping the police with the investigation." I was putting the best light on the situation for Loretta's sake.

"Loretta," I said, "your daddy wants me to bring you back to our place till he gets home. Then we can sort things out from there."

Loretta lifted her tear-swollen face and favored me with a malevolent glare. "You did this," she shrieked. "You killed my mama!"

Minnie broke in, "Now, Loretta, honey, Patsy wouldn't have killed your mama. And if she had," she continued, with a warning glance in my direction, "the cops would have her in jail." Minnie wasn't defending me. She just didn't want to end up with Loretta in her custody. Everybody knew that Loretta was trouble. Her mama'd been having a devil of a time trying to ride herd on her rebellious child.

Every time Freddy turned around, EAUDELEIN was on the phone whining about how Loretta had skipped school,

missed curfew, or talked back. What was he going to do about it? Then, when Freddy tried to do something, EAUDELEIN and LORETTA double-teamed him: Watching the two of them work Freddy over was like watching Roller Derby, only my Freddy was stuck in the middle.

"Loretta, honey," I said, trying again, "I know you feel awful. I can't imagine how terrible this is for you. Let's get a few of your things and go on back to my place. Your daddy needs you."

That did it; Freddy's baby girl was on her way to comfort her daddy. She tolerated me on the ride back across town. She sat hunched against the passenger-side car door, snuffling into a crumpled Kleenex. She was actually a very sad little girl, vulnerable in her grief, and not the hard case she led the rest of us to believe.

I didn't say much until we were inside. I offered her a Coke or something to eat, but she said no. "Where's my dad?" she asked after an hour had passed.

"I don't know, sugar." I was beginning to feel a little anxious myself. "Loretta, did your mama go out anyplace last night?" I figured Loretta might know something that would help Freddy out. The police

would want to talk to her at some point, too.

"I don't know. I was over at Tammara's, spending the night. Mama said she might be going out later but that she wouldn't be gone long." Loretta was tugging at her long black hair and chewing her lip. I could tell that my asking her questions was only going to make her more nervous, so I quit.

The sound of a car door slamming had both of us up out of our seats and over to the front door. It was Randy, and he was alone. Where was Freddy?

He didn't look me in the eye the whole way up the path. When he got to the bottom porch step, he looked up at the two of us. "Patsy. Loretta, I'm sorry about your mama." His eyes were sad.

"Where's my daddy?" Loretta asked, ignoring Randy's solicitude.

"Let's go inside," I interjected. I didn't figure we should be talking about all this under the neighbors' watchful eyes. Randy seemed to jump at the idea, so we trooped into my tiny living room.

"Loretta, Patsy, I wanted to be the one to tell you this. Freddy has been arrested for the murder of EAUDELEIN."

"Randy, how could you?" I yelled over Loretta's howl of



rage and grief. "You know better than that! You've fished with him. You know Freddy would never hurt anybody. It was all that Mertis's doing, wasn't it?"

Randy looked apologetically at Loretta. "Honey, I need to talk to Patsy alone. Would you excuse us?" Loretta favored him with one of her most evil glares, then flounced from the room. I figured she'd go just far enough to be out of sight yet still overhear our conversation.

Randy caught on and lowered his voice. "Patsy, his prints were all over the baseball bat used to bash in EAUDELEIN's head."

"Well, that don't mean nothing. Freddy kept that bat behind the counter, by the register. It stands to reason that his prints would be all over it."

"Freddy was out alone, without an alibi, at four A.M., the time of the murder. Everybody knows he and EAUDELEIN were at each other's throats. Somebody overheard the two of them fighting last week, and Freddy threatened to kill her then."

I knew the fight Randy meant. It had been all over town. Freddy had stopped to pick up Loretta at the house, and EAUDELEIN had come out to pick a fight. She threatened to keep Loretta away from Freddy. He'd freaked out and

told her he'd see her dead before he let her take Loretta away from him.

He didn't actually mean he would kill EAUDELEIN. It was a remark made in anger. I had to admit I wasn't sure what would have happened if EAUDELEIN had somehow taken Loretta away from Freddy.

"Daddy wouldn't kill Mama." We hadn't heard Loretta creep down the hallway, hadn't seen her walk into the room.

"I'm sorry, Loretta." Randy nodded to me and walked out the front screen door. "Patsy?"

"What, Randall?" We were adversaries now.

"Get Freddy a lawyer. He ain't thinkin' too clear."

I started to ask him what that meant, but he was already opening his car door.

Loretta was pacing the floor when I returned. "Well, what are you going to do?" she asked.

"Loretta, I know this has been a horrible day for you," I began.

"Cut the sympathy crap. I got one parent left. I ain't gonna lose him, too."

"All right then," I said evenly, "I'm dealin' you in. You and I are going to have to work together on this."

For the next hour that's what we did. I called Sam Barfield and retained him as Freddy's attorney. I had Loretta write

down everything she could remember about her mother's last twenty-four hours.

Loretta's list was scrawled in childish, loopy script across the paper I'd given her. She seemed to remember the details of EAUDELEIN's last day only as they pertained to herself. "Mama fixed me breakfast at ten A.M. Mama told me to clean my room before I went to Tammara's. Mama was washing up the supper dishes when I left with Tammara. She said she might go out later. I asked her to pick up more Froot Loops."

Loretta's little world revolved around Loretta. She could tell me pretty much every detail of her day, when she put on her makeup, what she wore, when her boyfriend Eddie called. Her mother existed as cook, chauffeur, and banker to Loretta's adolescent needs. Oh well, no help there.

"Loretta, I need to leave you here and go see your daddy."

She didn't like that. "I'm comin', too. He's my daddy." And you're only his girlfriend. She left that part hanging unspoken between us.

"They won't let minors in," I said. I grabbed my purse and car keys and headed for the door. "There's sandwich meat in the fridge. Don't go anywhere. I'll be back in an hour." Loretta was looking like a

thundercloud, but I continued on briskly. "If we're gonna prove that your daddy didn't kill your mama, we're gonna have to find out who did. Why don't you work on that list a bit more and see what you can remember. If your mama was going out last night, where was she going? Was she seein' anybody in particular?"

I left her sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the pad of paper with her mother's activities on it. When she didn't think I was looking, she allowed her grief to show through. Tears slid down her cheeks and hit the paper.

I got a bit nervous on the ride over to see Freddy. I'd never been inside the jail before. Everybody in town knew where it was—a mile outside of town, on State Route 138. It sat back from the road, a small, squat, concrete building with a barbed wire-enclosed exercise yard. Livin' around here, you drove past it on a regular basis, and like the cemetery, you didn't pay it much mind until you needed to.

Raydeen was working when I got there. We didn't know what to say to each other. If everyone thought Freddy was guilty, then what did they think about me? I didn't want to talk to Raydeen until I'd

talked to Freddy and figured out where things were heading.

"I guess you wanna see Freddy, huh?" she asked.

"Well, yeah." It was all I could do not to scream at her, I was so anxious.

She led me back to the jail proper. Steve Asher, a young deputy just a few years older than Loretta, let me into the visitors' room. There was a bank of cubicles with brown wooden chairs in front of the counters that held the phones. Just like TV, I thought. I entered a cubicle and sat down. The visitors before me had scratched their initials into the hard Formica: *C.R. + J.D.—love forever. T.J. loves M.J.—I will wait forever.*

When Freddy was brought in, I realized just how serious our situation was. The man I loved was in jail for murder. Even my loser first husband Roy hadn't ever been in jail.

Freddy looked scared. We picked up the receivers and pressed them to our ears. "How ya doin', babe?" he asked with a weak smile.

"Don't worry about me," I said. "Loretta's okay, too. I got her back at our place. Minnie's gonna handle the funeral arrangements." Freddy nodded. "I called Sam Barfield and asked him to represent you. He's gonna come by tonight or

first thing tomorrow." There was one brief moment when I found myself wondering, Freddy, you didn't do it, did you? Of course not. I couldn't doubt Freddy's innocence.

"Who could've killed her?" we both asked at the same instant.

"Patsy, don't take this wrong," Freddy began. "I'm sad about EAUDELEIN. Yesterday I could've told you that if her guts was on fire, I wouldn't a spit on her to put 'em out. But, hell, Patsy, I didn't want her to die. I keep thinkin' about when we first met, and when Loretta was little. I used to love her. She was Loretta's mama for Pete's sake." I listened, watching Freddy's face.

"They say I killed EAUDELEIN because she was gonna take Loretta away from me. They don't understand. EAUDELEIN would've come to her senses. I wouldn't have killed her, no matter what she did."

"Freddy," I broke in. "You don't have to explain it to me. I know you. We just gotta figure out who killed her. Do you have any idea?"

"EAUDELEIN had a habit of pissin' people off, but I don't know of anybody who hated her enough to kill her."

Freddy was thinking now, not feeling sorry for himself. That was good.

"Was she seein' anybody?"

"Well," he said slowly, "she'd been stranger than usual lately. She was real peculiar about when I picked 'up Loretta. She didn't want me just stopping by to see Loretta without asking. I figured she was seein' somebody and didn't want me to know. When she started talking about not letting me see Loretta, I started worrying that her new guy might live out of town. Maybe she was fixin' to move away with him or something."

The deputy, Steve, opened the door and said something to Freddy. "I gotta go now, babe. Hang in there."

Hang in there. That was my Freddy, worrying about me. I picked up my purse and headed home. At least I had something to go on now. EAUDELEIN had a new boyfriend. Loretta hadn't said a word about that.

It was the first thing I asked her about when I got home. She had been on the phone when I got there but hung up quickly as I walked through the front door. She'd been crying again. I sat down next to her on the couch. I wanted to reach over and put my arms around her, but she was such a prickly pear. She didn't like me, so I wasn't going to push myself on her.

"I stopped at the Kentucky Fried and grabbed us a bucket of extra crispy. Let's go eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Honey, you got to eat." Loretta was no match for me. She might have had the rest of the adults in Barrow scared of her, but I drove a schoolbus. I ate kids like her for lunch, sack and all.

"Sweetie," I went on, ignoring her attitude, "I know you don't feel like it, but we've got a lot to do. I can't have you fainting from lack of food. Eat. It'll make you feel better, and you'll be able to think better, too."

She followed me into the kitchen. We polished off the entire bucket between us and made big dents in the coleslaw and potatoes.

"Now," I said, clearing the plates away, "who was your mother seeing?"

Loretta looked uneasy. "Nobody," she said.

"Loretta," I said, daring her to lie again.

"She didn't want me to tell anybody." She was working it out. "It was Daddy's partner, Hank. Mama said Daddy'd freak if he knew. She and Hank wanted to keep it a secret till they figured out what to do."

Hank? That was so hard to believe. Hank and Freddy were best friends. They owned the Bait and Tackle Shop together. Hank had stuck by Freddy all through the divorce, siding

with him, commiserating with him. Hank would never go near EAUDELEIN.

"Loretta, are you sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure," she said earnestly. "If she was going out last night, it would have been with him. She always went out when I was with Daddy or over at a friend's house."

"When did she start seeing Hank?"

"About three months ago. I didn't find out until about a month ago. I came home early from a friend's house just as he was leavin'. Hank was all freaked about it. Mama just laughed. She told me later that Hank didn't want Daddy to know and that we'd better keep it quiet, just till everything got sorted out and they could tell Daddy."

This was just great. Freddy's ex and his best friend. If Freddy'd been bitter before, he'd swear off matrimony forever now. What this was gonna do to his friendship with Hank, and their business, was beyond me. I'd be really pissed if I were him.

Then I started thinking. Hank didn't have an alibi for last night. Hank was the last person to see EAUDELEIN alive. Could he have killed her?

"Loretta, I gotta go see Hank." I was headed for the

door before she could formulate a response.

"Wait," she yelled as I pushed open the door. "I'm coming, too."

"No, Loretta. You stay here by the phone. If your daddy calls, don't tell him where I am." Oh good, I thought, now I'm a liar, too.

Hank wasn't at the bait shop. The door had a sign, hastily scrawled, that read: "Closed due to death."

I headed on down to the lake where Hank had a double-wide. Hank was thirty-five and had never been married. He lived alone on the lake, where he kept his Ranger bass boat lovingly housed in a covered boat dock. The boathouse and bass boat had cost Hank more than his lake property and the double-wide. Hank lived to fish. He was a tall, quiet man who had always seemed a bit awkward around women. I'd seen him many a time, chatting it up with a male customer about fish, or what bait to use. As soon as a woman so much as pulled up to the gas pumps outside, he'd clam up. He was only a little less bashful around me.

He was walking up the hill from the dock when I got out of my car. His head was down, and he carried his tackle box with him. I waited till he got closer, then called out, "What's

the matter, fish not bitin'?" Hank was startled and turned a bright red.

"Aw, I just thought fishing might take my mind off things. You know how that goes, I guess."

"No, Hank, I don't. I've been forced to stay right here dealin' with Loretta and gettin' your buddy Freddy a lawyer."

Hank's blush crept down his neck, below his bushy black beard. His ears were burning, too. I was angry, but I didn't want to blow any chance of getting information from him by losing it.

"Loretta told me you've been seein' EAUDELEIN. She said you saw her last night." I just laid it there between us and waited.

"Oh, Patsy. Gawd dawg." Hank sighed and wiped his hand over his face. "Yeah, it's true. Gawd, I feel like such a heel. I didn't mean nobody any pain. EAUDELEIN, she just kept comin' around and comin' around, talkin' and flirtin' with me." He paused and fiddled with the latch on his tackle box.

"She told me she liked me. She wanted us to go out. I told her no at first, but she had such a way about her." When EAUDELEIN wanted something, she got it all right. Hank, with his lack of experience with women, would have been no match for

EAUDELEIN. I waited for him to go on.

"I never had a woman do that to me before." He looked like a stupid schoolboy. He'd fallen in love. "I didn't know what to do about it. It was killin' me. I felt like dirt every time I was around Freddy. I wanted to tell him, but I never could find the right time."

"Were you with her last night?"

Hank looked miserable. "No, er, aw hell, yeah. I was with her. But honest to Gawd, I had her back to her place by one. She didn't want to stay over 'cause Loretta was comin' home first thing in the morning. We hung around here, then I took her back to her place."

"Did you see her go inside?" Hank nodded yes. "Then what happened?"

"Well, I came back here and decided to go fishin'. I'd told Freddy I'd meet him out on the lake by daybreak. I figured I'd just hook up with him earlier. I wasn't really sleepy, and I did need to get some time in before the tournament."

"Well, good, then," I said, relieved. "You and Freddy are each other's alibis for the time of the murder."

Hank looked down, scuffing at a patch of grass with his boot. "Patsy, I didn't find Freddy till around five. He

wasn't in any of our usual places. I looked everywhere. I finally caught up to him at the gas docks. I don't know where he was."

This was not good. I left Hank's feeling more confused than before. Where had Freddy been? Was Hank telling the truth? I was inclined to think so. Freddy was gonna be devastated when he found out Hank had been lying to him for months. How could he ever trust anyone again? We'd never get married at this rate.

It was best not to dwell on that right now. I was gonna have enough trouble springing Freddy from jail. Maybe Loretta had remembered some helpful detail from EAUDELEIN's life that could help us figure out just who had done her in. But I wasn't feeling hopeful when I got back home.

Loretta's boyfriend Eddie had come over. She'd known better than to let him in, so they were sitting on the porch swing together. Loretta was crying, and Eddie had his arm around her shoulders.

She wiped her eyes and jumped up to greet me as I started up the path. "Well," she said impatiently, "what did he say? Was he with her?"

"He was with her," I answered, "but he dropped her

back at the house around one A.M."

"Bullsh . . ." Loretta broke off abruptly and clammed up.

"Loretta? Do you know something else? Have you remembered something else?"

"No. You didn't believe him, did you?"

"I don't know, Loretta. I was kinda hoping he would tell us something that would let your father off the hook, but if anything, he made it more confusing. He said after he dropped your mama off, he went looking for your daddy out on the lake but didn't find him till five."

Loretta was scowling. Eddie must have sensed that another storm was brewing because he said he had to get on home. Loretta let him kiss her on the cheek, then watched him climb into his old clunker and drive off.

I went inside, and Loretta followed me. "I'm gonna go off for a little while," she said.

"You can't go off now. It's getting dark." I didn't want her wandering across town alone, after dark.

"I wanta go see Tammara." Tears trembled on her lashes. "She's my best friend."

I sighed. Hell, the kid had lost her mama, and her daddy had been arrested, all in one day. If she wanted to talk to her best friend, then why not?



"All right, but I'll drive you over." That suited her. "And you can't stay too long. I'll run a couple of errands, then come back and pick you up." Loretta didn't say anything, just sat quietly for the short ride to Tammara's.

Tammara was waiting in the front yard. She was a cute, short cheerleader with an attitude. She wore combat boots and little round sunglasses and had her hair pulled back in a ponytail. When Loretta hopped out of the car, Tammara wrapped her in a tight hug and began to cry tears of sympathy.

I leaned out the windows. "I'll be back to get you in an hour," I called. As I drove away, I saw the two girls sink into a huddle on the front lawn. I decided to go see Minnie, EAUDELEIN's sister, and let her know that I'd be keeping Loretta indefinitely. I needed to find out about the funeral arrangements, too.

Minnie's place wasn't hard to find. She and the rest of EAUDELEIN's family lived in a family compound that surrounded their grandfather's farm. Minnie was sitting on the front porch of her tiny house with a few other family members. They all stared as I pulled in the driveway and parked. "Hey, Minnie," I said as I walked up. I didn't wait for her

to respond. "I just came by to let you know we'd be keeping Loretta."

"For how long?" she asked. Everyone else just stared.

"We'll figure out the details when Freddy gets out."

Minnie snorted. "Freddy Buck Owens murdered my sister. He'll never see the outside of a prison if I have anything to do with it." She was daring me to get into it with her.

I ignored the bait. "Did you know she was seeing Hank?" I asked.

"Me and just about everybody else in town but you and Freddy." The group on the porch snickered. This was going nowhere. I could call the town's one funeral parlor to find out about the funeral. In the meantime, I needed to get to the Piggly Wiggly and buy Froot Loops for Loretta.

It had been exactly an hour when I returned to Tammara's house. The girls had disappeared from the front yard, so I went up to the front door and rang the bell. Tammara's mother came to the door looking politely confused. I explained that I'd come to pick up Loretta.

"Oh, well, they're not here. Tammara left to drive Loretta home. She said they were supposed to meet you there."

"Maybe we miscommunicated," I said. "I'll meet them there." I turned to leave, then turned around. "Can I ask you one more question?"

"Sure." Tammara's mother waited.

"When did Loretta leave to go home this morning?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Tammara's mother said. "Loretta wasn't here this morning."

"She didn't spend the night?"

"No, absolutely not. Tammara's been on restriction all week. She hasn't been allowed to have company. I only made an exception today because of Loretta's mother."

Loretta had lied.

I didn't know what was going on, but I was beginning to get a picture. I couldn't wait to get to that girl, but when I got to my place, Loretta wasn't there.

Maybe Tammara had driven Loretta to see Eddie. I knew his parents, so it wasn't hard to find his phone number in the book. Eddie answered. No, he hadn't seen or heard from Loretta. Just as well; I'd thought of a few questions I wanted to ask him without Loretta around to coach him. I grabbed my chance. "Eddie, where did you and Loretta go last night?"

"We went to, uh, well, we were just riding around the square. Then . . ." Eddie caught

up with himself and clammed up. Bingo. The next question I wanted to ask in person.

I raced across town and was in luck. Eddie answered the door. He was startled to see me, and frightened. "Come out here on the porch," I hissed. He hesitated, looking back over his shoulder into the living room where his parents sat.

"Who is it, Eddie?" his father called.

"Just a friend, Dad." Eddie quickly pulled the door shut behind him and stepped outside. "I told you, she's not here," he said.

"I know, Eddie. I just had one more question. Where did you two spend the night?"

Eddie was flustered. "What do you mean? We didn't . . ."

I didn't have time to waste on whatever story he was trying to manufacture. I had a feeling that Loretta was in danger. "Cut to the chase, Eddie. I know you and Loretta spent the night together. Now, was it at her house or where?"

Eddie gave up. "Yeah, we were at her place. Her mama was spending the night out with her boyfriend."

"Did she tell Loretta that?"

"No, but that's what she always did when Loretta wasn't home. That's why we knew it would be cool at her place."

That was all I needed to hear. I turned and raced for the car. I yelled back over my shoulder, "Eddie, call the sheriff, ask for Randy Vaughn. Tell him Patsy said to get out to Hank Starr's, and bring some deputies with him." Eddie seemed hesitant. "Do it, Eddie!"

He had turned and was going inside when I drove off. I had to hurry. My car, an older Cavalier, wasn't used to fast speeds. I drove defensively, prided myself on that; now I hurtled out of town like a maniac.

When I hit the dirt road to Hank's place, I had to stand on the brakes to keep from plowing into the rear of Tammara's VW. Tammara was leaning against the side, smoking a cigarette. She looked scared.

"Oh man, I'm really glad you're here. Loretta told me to wait here and, if she wasn't back in a half hour, call you." She twisted her watch around on her wrist and stared at it. "It's been twenty-seven minutes."

Loretta had been a very foolish girl. "Tammara, here's what you do, honey. Get yourself up the road to the Quick Stop and use their phone to call 911. Tell them to get ahold of Randy, and give him directions here. Tell him to hurry." I

wanted to cover myself in case Eddie hadn't called.

Then I took off running for Hank's place. I didn't want him to hear me coming and do anything foolish. It was quite dark now; the light in Hank's boat-house was the only thing to guide me. I crept past the house, headed for the dock.

The sound of voices carried up from the water. Hank's was a low monotone, Loretta's an angry tornado. "You can't get away with this," she yelled. "They'll know it was you." I slipped silently up to the boat-house. Hank was unhitching the bow lines and preparing to cast off. Loretta lay on the floor of the boat, her arms and legs bound with rope.

"Loretta," Hank said as he moved to untie the stern lines, "This carryin' on won't do you no good. Cain't nobody hear you. I wouldn't be havin' to do this if you'd been doin' what yore mama told you to do last night." Hank moved to the driver's seat and inserted the key in the ignition. He was fixin' to pull out of the boat-house and take Loretta. I couldn't let that happen.

"My daddy'll come after you, Hank," Loretta screamed. "They'll fry your ass if you kill me. I'm a minor." Oh nice goin', Loretta, I thought.

Hank stayed cool. "No they won't, Loretta. When you don't show up, they'll figure you lured your mama down to your daddy's shop and killed her. They'll think you wanted to frame your daddy so's you could get the insurance money. Just like them brothers out in California done. Kids are runnin' wild these days."

Loretta's response was lost as Hank cranked the engine. It was now or never. I made my move. I took a flying leap from the dock and hit the bow of the boat just as it moved out of the slip into the open channel.

Loretta's eyes widened, and Hank looked as if he couldn't believe it was me. When he came for me, I tried to be ready. All those classes at Mr. Chu's Tae Kwan Do studio were going to come in handy, I thought. Where were the police?

"Hank Starr, you take this boat back to shore!" I screamed. "I'm placing you under a citizen's arrest!" His beefy hands wrapped around my throat like a vise. This was not like any practice I'd ever done at Mr. Chu's. Spots danced before my eyes and as it grew impossible to breathe, I saw Freddy's face. He was lookin' real sad, and I started feelin' sad. We were never gonna get married. Then I started getting mad. Hell fire, it was always something.

Mr. Chu's face floated up then. What was he saying? Oh, yeah, I could hear his voice. "Find your rage," he said. "Break his hold. Hit him where it hurts. Predators look for the weak."

I had found my rage. No Hank Starr was gonna keep me from the altar. I summoned up one last burst of energy and threw my arms up through Hank's. I brought my knee up and rammed it into his groin. I had lost control and was going to kill him. I shattered his kneecap with a swift kick and would have crushed his windpipe had not Randy arrived.

Apparently he'd been screaming at me from the shore, but I hadn't heard. As the boat had drifted back toward the dock, Randy had leapt on board.

He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Patsy, stop. It's Randy. Stop, you're okay now." I was shaking with the adrenaline and fear. "It's okay now, honey," he said, pulling me closer to him.

The dock was overrun with deputies. Raydeen was bustling around, issuing orders. Randy told me later that both Eddie and Tammara had called 911, leaving desperate messages. Randy had arrived with all the backup available in Wallace County.

Hank told everything once he was faced with the reality of his arrest. He and EAUDELEIN had been at the bait shop around three A.M. Hank was preparing to go fishing and needed to pick up some bait. He and EAUDELEIN had been out drinking all night, celebrating because EAUDELEIN had agreed to marry Hank. While Hank was scooping out minnows, EAUDELEIN started going on about how, when they were married, she'd have control over the Bait Shop. She was crowing about how she'd make Freddy's life miserable. Hank realized that EAUDELEIN never really loved him; she'd merely wanted to use him to torture her ex-husband.

Hank, about to lose the one love of his life, lost control. He grabbed the baseball bat and beat EAUDELEIN to death. He was getting ready to take her out to the middle of the lake and dump her when some fishermen pulled up to the shop.

They saw Hank's pickup, figured someone was there, and began knocking on the door.

Hank panicked and dumped EAUDELEIN in the tank. Then he gave the men bait and sent them on their way. Even though the men weren't locals, Randy figured they'd be easy enough to track down, if need be.

"The way things look now," Randy said, "Hank's gonna plead guilty. Says he was temporarily insane."

"Hell," said Freddy as Randy returned his personal belongings and signed the release papers, "I guess that explains my whole marriage to EAUDELEIN. Too bad I couldn't plead that during the divorce."

Freddy stuck close by me the whole ride home. "Babe, you sure he didn't hurt you?"

"Freddy, I'm fine," I insisted. If the truth be known, I was enjoying myself.

"Babe, I just don't know how I can ever repay you," he said for the umpteenth time.

"Aw, Freddy," I said, patting his knee, "we'll think of something." I was thinking a June weddin' would be nice. We'd hitch a knot in the tail of matrimony yet.

# **The Domino Drug Bust: A Love Story**

**by Bobby Lee**

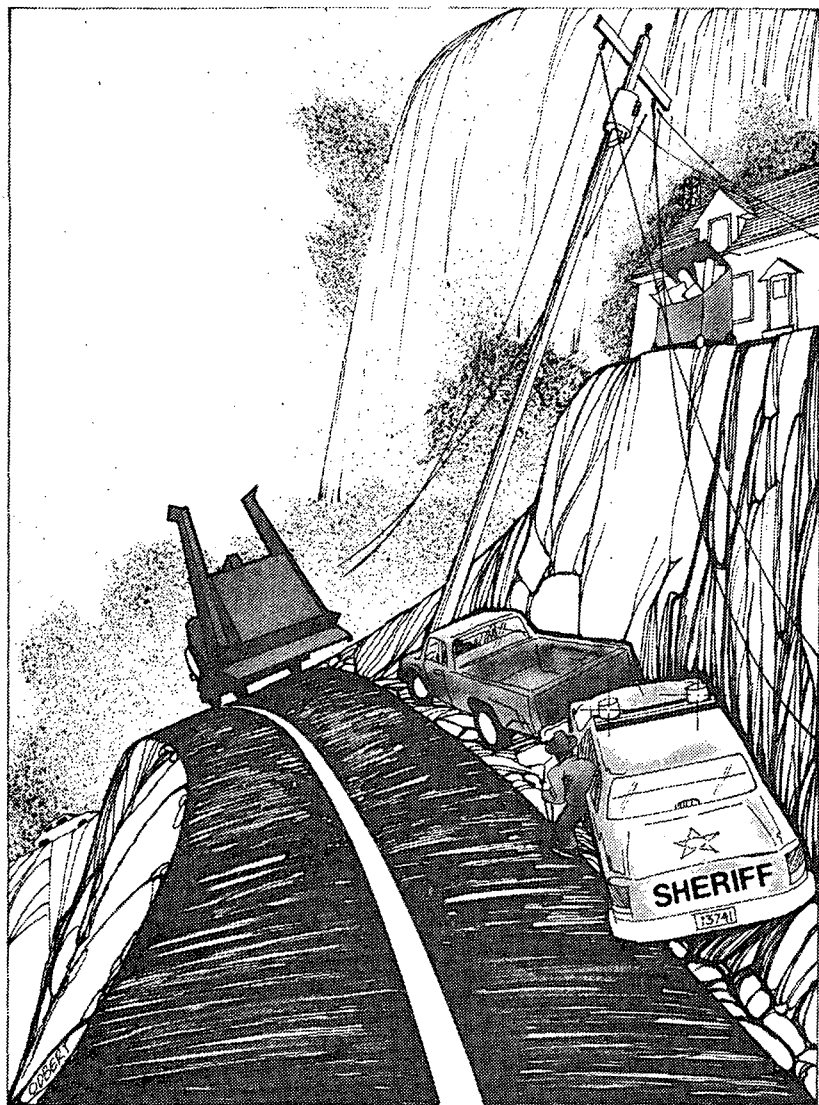
**I**f the truth were known, the whole business actually got started with a nap. An untimely nap, maybe. But a nap, nonetheless. Which isn't exactly what you'd call an auspicious beginning, considering that the outcome was the biggest, not to mention the strangest, drug bust in all of Miller County history.

It's just that Sheriff Duncan was really tired, and really sleepy. And the midafternoon sun coming through the windshield had warmed the car up so nicely that, with speeders out on Highway 17 being so rare anyway, well, it was only natural for him to conclude that his daily afternoon patrol out past Harvester's Maw would be a perfect opportunity to catch up on some of the sleep he'd lost on account of his weekly game of dominoes with Miss Petula running so late the night before. After all, who knew?

Who knew that dusty old pickup full of out-of-towners would come racing down the highway at twenty miles an hour over the posted speed limit? Who knew they'd come roaring right past the very spot where the sheriff had chosen to pull off the road and park that shiny new squad car the mayor had bought to help fight the rising tide of crime in America, just like he'd promised to do during the last campaign?

Well, the fact of the matter is, nobody knew. Least of all Sheriff Duncan, a man going on seventy-four years of age and in dire need of sleep. But in point of fact, that's exactly what they did. And that's when things began to get a little out of hand.

Because that transition from deep sleep to wide awake isn't easy. Not for anybody. Just consider the last time your phone rang in the middle of the night, and how that surge of adrenaline carried you halfway down the hall on the way to answer it before your brain even figured out what it was you'd heard. Well, that's pretty much how it was for Sheriff Duncan when that old truck went whizzing past and woke him up so unexpectedly. His body more or less just jumped right into action, even though his brain was



BREATHING A SIGH OF RELIEF THEY COULD'VE HEARD DOWNTOWN, HE  
PULLED TO A STOP JUST SHORT OF WHERE THE TRUCK WAS SITTING. JUST  
IN TIME TO WATCH THE UTILITY POLE FALL.

*Illustration by Jim Odbert*

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still asleep and his body was acting pretty much at the complete discretion of adrenaline.

Not that you'd have known it from looking, the way he slammed that new high performance engine into gear and went squalling and slip-sliding out onto the highway. But if the truth were known, he was halfway down to Harvester's Maw and riding right up on the rear bumper of that truck before his brain even considered switching on.

Well, it goes without saying that when his brain finally did switch on it was only to discover that it was facing a fair-sized dilemma, what with him racing bumper to bumper with that old pickup right into Harvester's Maw. Which, as it turned out, wasn't anything compared to the dilemma facing the driver of that pickup truck, who'd not only been more than a little bit spooked at the way that car he was watching in his rear view mirror had raced up and parked right off his rear bumper, but was well on his way to becoming downright terrified from the realization that the car that was tailgating him was a police cruiser.

The thing is, what with him being from out of town and all, the driver of that truck was totally unaware that the Maw had gotten its name from the way local harvesting equipment, when it's being transported out on the highway, has a tendency to swallow up whole unsuspecting motorists who insist on going too fast around that big curve out on the edge of town. And of course, when he panicked at the thought of being pulled over, at the thought of being caught redhanded with the contraband he was carrying, and he slammed his foot down on the accelerator and began to pull out ahead of the police cruiser, he had absolutely no way at all of knowing that he was already staring down the throat of the Maw. And wouldn't you just know that, true to form, right when he started banking into that ninety degree turn, that ugly mechanical monster reared its massive body up in the road ahead, blocking out the whole world except for what looked to him like acre after acre of John Deere green.

Now, about the time that old pickup went fishtailing out of sight around the curve of the Maw, the sheriff, who had finally wakened to the point that he was beginning to question the wisdom of stampeding a speeding out-of-towner right into the depths of the Maw without nary a by your leave nor word of warning, was also beginning to more fully appreciate his own predicament. Because, being

a local, he understood all too well how few options the Maw leaves.

You see, Highway 17, being an old stretch of road, was built back in the days when roads still followed property lines and went around rather than through hills. This particular stretch of Highway 17 comes down on a pretty straight line from the north until within a mile or so of the outskirts of Crenshaw, at which point it runs up at a forty-five degree angle onto a long narrow hill that locally goes by the name of Beaumont Ridge. To avoid going either all the way over the top or right through Beaumont Ridge, after the highway climbs partway up the side of the ridge it bends through a ninety degree turn to the east, forming the curve known as Harvester's Maw. From there it runs pretty much in a straight line east, angling away from the crest of the ridge, until it reaches the heart of Crenshaw.

Now, what all that means is that, as you round the Maw, all you've got on the right as a buffer between you and the ridge is the shoulder of the road, a ditch, a stretch of ground maybe six feet wide. Off to your left, of course, you're looking at a pretty sharp dropoff down to the bottom of the ridge. So when you come around the curve too fast and find yourself overtaking one of those big, slow-moving harvesters that take up all of their own lane and the better part of the other lane, you don't have a lot of choices. What most folks faced with that dilemma choose to do is to panic, which generally means they end up driving right up the tail end of the harvester.

What the driver of that pickup, who in fact was a mighty fine driver in his own right, chose to try to do was to veer sharply off to the right, leap that ditch, and glance off the bluff on the other side before finally straightening back out on that little stretch of ground between the bluff and the ditch. What in fact he did was veer to the right, clip the tail end of that harvester with his front left bumper, slide down one side of the ditch and back up the other, and skid across that short stretch of ground on the other side and into the bluff. Which was pretty close to the outcome he'd been looking for, even if the method was a bit different from what he'd planned. The only problem was, he hadn't anticipated that there might be a utility pole standing there right in his way, and before he could bring that truck to a stop, he'd slammed into that pole and snapped it right in half.

What the sheriff chose to do, on the other hand, was to bank on the fact that there wasn't going to be any oncoming traffic getting

around that green monster up ahead, and to take the opportunity to move over into the left lane while bleeding off his speed as fast as he could by holding his brakes down just shy of the point of locking up. And in a maneuver the kids around these parts will be talking about and trying to copy for years to come, instead of braking still harder the way every fiber of his being was demanding, he let off the brakes entirely as he entered the curve and let the car coast, allowing his speed to edge him back across the road and into his own lane. Scraping past the back end of the harvester so closely that he could've reached out and touched up the paint job that'd been marred when the pickup clipped it, he came out the other side of the Maw and pulled off onto the shoulder of the road. And, breathing a sigh of relief they could've heard downtown, he pulled to a stop just a few feet short of where the truck was sitting. Just in time to watch the utility pole fall.

See, what had happened was that the truck had clipped that pole with its right front bumper and then rolled on ahead several feet, penning the lower end of the upper piece between the side of the truck and the bottom of the bluff. Which for a second or two provided enough support to keep the top half of that pole sitting pretty much upright, though it was teetering back and forth a mite, first one way, then the other. Which was just long enough for the sheriff to arrive. At which time the sheriff heard a sharp crack and looked up in time to see the top half of the pole tear loose and fall over against the crest of the ridge.

Which, as it turned out, was not really a good thing. Because it was just at that point along the crest of the ridge that old Joe Walker Senior had chosen to build his house. Not that the pole hit his house, mind you. But one of those wooden crosspieces that they attach power lines to did just barely graze that big commercial dumpster that was sitting at the top of old Joe Senior's driveway. The very same dumpster that old Joe had put up on a set of wheels so he could wheel it around all over the place, and that he'd been using to hold all the waterlogged carpet and lumber he'd been pulling out of his back bedroom, which had been ruined when the roof sprung a leak back during those awful spring storms. And, well, when it was hit by that crosspiece, that dumpster just sort of was nudged over the tiniest bit. Which started it rolling down the driveway.

Now, old Joe Senior has a driveway that runs from his house on down to the bottom of the hill, where it connects up to the highway

just a little beyond where the pickup had slammed into that pole. And as luck would have it, that dumpster rolled all the way down that hill and out onto the highway. And of all things, it crossed over the center line and into the far lane just as Miss Petula was coming up the highway in that brand new Lincoln she'd gone all the way up to Kansas City to buy for herself on her seventy-third birthday.

Of course Miss Petula did her best to try to avoid that dumpster, and even though she is going on seventy-four, same as the sheriff, she's not a bad driver. But it wouldn't have mattered if she'd been Joie Chitwood. There just wasn't time or room. And before the sheriff could move or even yell a warning, she slammed right into the side of that dumpster, which, being filled with waterlogged carpet and lumber and being a pretty fair-sized object to begin with, probably weighed more than that Lincoln did. And it was definitely moving faster. And that Lincoln just sort of lost out in the shoving match that ensued and went careening right off the far side of the road.

Now, curious thing about it is that, while old Joe Walker lives on the bluff off on the south side of the road, Joe Walker Junior lives right across the road on the north side, down in the valley where old Stimson's Creek used to run before it dried up back when they started diverting the water for agricultural use upstream a few miles. And between the highway and Joe Junior's place there's not a thing that would stop a car. Not a ditch or a tree or anything. Just a long clear slope that leads right on down into Joe Junior's back yard.

So naturally that Lincoln not only went off the road, but plunged right on down that hillside, picking up speed every step of the way. And by the time it got to the bottom of the hill, it was going so fast that it crashed right through that giant privet hedge that forms a fifteen foot high border all around Joe Junior's yard. In fact, it was going so fast that after it passed through the hedge it plowed right on through the yard and crashed right into the back of Joe Junior's house.

Joe Junior's house, unfortunately, was built right on the shaved-off top of a little hillock that overlooks the creekbed. And when that Lincoln crashed into it, the force of the impact just sort of broke that house in two, and the front piece slid off the far side of that hillock and into the creekbed. The back end of the house, once it was no longer anchored in place by the front end, was free to

slide right off the back side of the hillock and more or less just sort of swallow up that Lincoln, Miss Petula and all. At the same time, what remained of the roof just sort of collapsed down real gently on to the top of the car, kind of like the top of a soufflé falling as it cools, penning Miss Petula inside.

Well, it shouldn't come as any big surprise that right about now Sheriff Duncan was starting to feel like he was in a *Twilight Zone* episode or something, what with such an innocent act as taking a nap leading to such a bizarre and unlikely chain of events. And just to complete the picture, as if things weren't crazy enough, from out of nowhere appeared both old Joe Senior, who's been an insurance agent in these parts for probably twenty years, and his son Joe Junior, who for two years now has been working as a photographer for the *Crenshaw Weekly* while moonlighting taking pictures for his father's agency. And they began scurrying all around the place, like a pair of mice in a cheese factory, taking measurements and shooting pictures for all the world like they were planning to file an insurance claim right at that very moment, with neither one of them even noticing that Miss Petula was still in the car trapped under that collapsed roof.

Needless to say, when it finally dawned on him what the two of them were doing, the sheriff pretty much just exploded into a fit of apoplexy. After all, there he was worrying about whether Miss Petula was even alive, and maybe wondering a little what he would do if she wasn't, what with her pretty much being a permanent fixture in his life, not to mention his one and only dominoes partner, throughout these past sixty-odd years, and those two boneheads were down there taking pictures for an insurance claim for all the world like she wasn't even there!

Well, after several futile attempts to draw the attention of the Walkers to the plight of Miss Petula by shouting at them, the sheriff abandoned the attempt and began searching for some alternative course of action. And to his everlasting embarrassment and regret, what caught his attention at that very moment was the winch that was attached to the front end of the pickup truck, which was still sitting there next to the bottom of that fallen utility pole.

With the line from the winch securely fastened to the portion of Joe Junior's roof that was resting on top of Miss Petula's Lincoln, Sheriff Duncan threw the switch and started reeling it in. And

once the change in the whine of the winch told him that it was pulling a load, he crossed the highway and sat down on the shoulder to catch his breath and watch what was happening down below.

And of course, as if old Rod Serling himself was behind the scenes manipulating events, things just proceeded to get stranger and stranger. Because the piece of roof that was sitting on top of that Lincoln lurched forward no more than a couple of feet before it caught on something and stopped. But the winch kept winding away, the pitch of its whine getting higher and higher all the while, until there was a loud, wrenching sound and that truck started to roll forward. And wouldn't you know it, that old winch just pulled that truck right back across the ditch, up onto and across the highway, and down the hill on the other side, barely missing taking the sheriff with it.

Right on down the hill it went, jostling and bouncing and picking up speed all the way. By the time the sheriff had climbed to his feet and started racing down the hillside, it'd passed right through the opening in Joe Junior's hedge opened by Miss Petula's Lincoln and crashed into the Walkers, who didn't see it coming on account of being so totally engrossed in assessing the damage to what appeared to be the remains of a lawn jockey, scattering them across the yard like they were bowling pins.

Without even slowing down, it raced on across the yard and crashed right into the back of the Lincoln, and the force of the impact was so great that it pushed the Lincoln the rest of the way into what was left of Joe Junior's house, and the pickup just sort of slipped right into the opening that was left when the Lincoln moved on. Only the pickup was taller than the Lincoln, and when it slipped into that opening, it sort of just popped that section of roof right up into the air. Which lifted more or less straight up for several feet, then came crashing down with considerable force right on top of the pickup, crushing the truck's roof and popping the windows right out of their frames and the hubcaps right off the wheels.

It was an awful sight to see, the way the bodies and all the bits and pieces of debris were strewn all over Joe Junior's yard, and the way the house had pretty much been reduced to just a pile of rubble. And when Sheriff Duncan finally came running into the yard, huffing and puffing so hard his face was beet red, and saw what he'd done, he figured that for him the game was pretty much

over. If Miss Petula hadn't been killed by the original crash, she was surely dead by now. And even though he'd never in a million years let on to anybody how he felt about her, the thought that she might be dead was too horrifying to even entertain.

On the other hand, having suffered her wrath almost perpetually throughout their long and somewhat strange relationship, he found the thought of finding her alive, of having to face her and own up to what he'd caused to happen to her precious car, almost as horrifying. Especially after he scrambled over the top of that pile of rubble and saw what was left of the Lincoln, which oddly enough was sitting on the family room rug, snuggled up real cosy next to the fireplace. It took him a couple of seconds to verify that Miss Petula was still breathing, but he knew immediately that the car was gone. A total loss. It made him want to just sit down and cry.

Which, curiously enough, was pretty much what he was preparing to do when he happened to notice that the ground around the pickup truck was literally covered with these little plastic bags that were filled with some kind of white powder. Little plastic bags that had apparently been stashed between the truck's hubcaps and tires and had fallen out when the hubcaps popped off.

So, to make a long story short, that was how Sheriff Duncan happened to win that award for making the biggest drug bust in the whole history of Miller County. Not that he would want anyone to go around repeating all the details, you understand, what with him being a hero now and the governor having given him that award already. After all, there really isn't any reason to go around embarrassing people, is there?

And besides, in a way he did sort of earn that award. Not by chasing that pickup truck and getting half the county torn up and in the hospital, of course, but by finally screwing up his courage and facing Miss Petula with the truth of what had really happened to her Lincoln. Well, he at least told her part of the truth. He left out the part where he was afraid of finding her alive.

As it turns out, he made his confession when he stopped off at the hospital on his way up to Jefferson City, where the right honorable governor of the State of Missouri was waiting to give him his award. He even took her some flowers, which was kind of out of character for him. Except Miss Petula insisted later on that she



had on several occasions informed him that she was allergic to that particular variety of flower.

Of course, if you ask him about it, he'll deny it. But then he'll give you a funny little smile, and then he'll say he would've done it anyway, on account of he's known all along that she's been sweet on him all these sixty-odd years that they've known each other, and that he doesn't want to leave her any false impressions, like maybe she has more of a chance with him than she really does.

But folks who know him don't buy that story. And at least two reliable witnesses who were on the spot insist that even though the whole time he was there she was chewing him up one side and down the other for being so foolish and irresponsible, when he left her room he was smiling and humming for all the world to see. Which is really pretty extraordinary behavior for a man Miss Petula says is the orneriest critter humankind ever got around to spawning.

The thing is, for Sheriff Duncan, being chewed out by Miss Petula like that's better than getting a hug from anybody else. Or a medal from the governor, if the truth were known. Because he knows it's just her way of letting him know without actually saying it that she still cares.

Oh, and by the way. While he was at the hospital he learned that the Walkers are going to be up and walking around again in no time. Which is good news, since the sheriff's been thinking maybe he could get Joe Junior to take a picture of him holding that award the governor gave him. He figures he's going to give it to Miss Petula as a present the next time they play dominoes.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**S**am Siciliano's **The Angel of the Opera** (Otto Penzler Books, \$21.95) is the second book I've reviewed this year that pits Sherlock Holmes against the Phantom of the Opera. No matter; one can't have too much of Holmes. Siciliano provides Holmes with a likeable young cousin, Dr. Henry Vernier, to stand in for Watson on this case, so we get a fresh viewpoint on the master sleuth and his methods. The physical descriptions of the Paris Opera House in 1890 are delicious, the character of the "phantom," especially in his exchanges with Holmes, is complex and intriguing, and the author has invented a surprising new ending. Holmes fans and readers of period mysteries won't want to miss this one.

The author of **Otherwise Known as Murder**, Neil McGaughey, is a mystery book reviewer. So is Stokes Moran, the protagonist in this charming, lighthearted debut (Scribners, \$20). Thus not only is it fun following Stokes (who writes his reviews under a pen name) all over New Orleans as he searches for the identity of a blockbuster mystery novelist (who writes his novels under a pen name), but each chapter opens with a brief excerpt from one of the hero's reviews. What a great way to name-drop; the Moran reviews will surely drive McGaughey's readers back to the bookstore to sample some of his hero's personal favorites. Moran's first-person voice is appealing, and the plot has twists galore. I'd guess that McGaughey has created a character who is going to have readers clamoring for more.

Mary Higgins Clark fans should seek out **Sideshow** by Anne LeClaire (Viking, \$19.95). Soleil Browne is a very private Boston museum librarian who is drafted to participate in the museum's dreamlab exhibit. To her greater chagrin, the lab technician who will be monitoring her sleep is a former lover. But worst of all are the dreams as Soleil begins to share the life of Shoe, a twelve-year-old girl living on a hardscrabble farm during the Depression. The suspense builds as Soleil and the reader clearly see the danger threatening the child, realizing that finally Soleil must risk her own life to save the child's. LeClaire's writing is evocative (Shoe's scenes are especially strong), and the premise of a psychic bond between two protagonists—one in the past, one in the present—is intriguing.

**Carnival of Saints** (Carroll & Graf, \$21.95) by George Herman introduces an unlikely pair of sleuths in this latest new series to vie for the attention of historical mystery lovers. Niccolo is a young dwarf, a bright and mischievous lad who has been schooled by monks. When he saves the life of the dreadful duke of Milan, he's summoned to court. There he is befriended by Leonardo da Vinci, the duke's eccentric resident artist and weapons designer. Soon the two team up to find out who is behind a list of murder victims, alarmingly long even in this age of the Borgias. To season the broth, Herman has tossed in a lively bunch of touring players, a number of court romances and intrigues, a shadowy assassin, and an all-out war. The result is wacky black comedy for mystery lovers with a taste for the offbeat.

**The Body Farm** (Scribners, \$23) is Patricia Cornwell's fifth novel in the Kay Scarpetta series. Kay, Richmond's medical examiner, is also officially assigned to the FBI team that tracks serial killers. The manner of death in the recent murder of a kidnapped girl has the entire FBI team worried that a recent escapee, an arch-enemy from an earlier novel, is not only on the loose but is on the rampage. To further complicate Kay's life, an accusation of espionage is threatening her niece Lucy's new career with the FBI, while her old friend Marino's longtime career as a detective is being compromised not only by his drinking but also by his obsession with the dead girl's mother. Fans should be pleased with this tale, but some readers may find it disappointing that the plot is primarily driven by the conflicted relationships in Kay's personal life.

William Marshall continues his outrageously imaginative Yellowthread Street series with **Inches** (Mysterious Press, \$19.95),

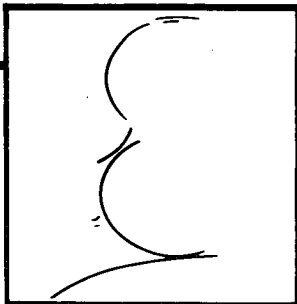
and like the earlier books this one defies easy description. Nine people lie dead in a bank, obviously killed instantly—but how? That's the question Detective Chief Inspector Harry Feiffer of the Hong Kong police must answer before he even begins to tackle the question of whodunit. Meanwhile, his colleague O'Yee has been sent a cryptic order to haunt the seamier streets of Hong Kong disguised as a bum, and the detective team of Auden and Spencer wrangle with the mystery at the Institute of the Inner Yu, where clients are unaccountably throwing themselves out of the skyscraper's upper windows. Marshall's breathless, twisted tale teeters between madness and melodrama and leaves the reader tottering, as if he's just stepped out of a roller-coaster car.

A theater fire sends Edward Marston's Elizabethan hero, stage manager Nicholas Bracewell, and his troupe on the road until their London home can be repaired. Thus begins **The Silent Woman** (St. Martin's, \$21.95), the sixth book in this likeable historical series. The journey is especially painful for Nick, however; he is heading toward his Cornish hometown with a heavy heart and not a little foreboding. A young woman from his town, apparently dispatched with an urgent message for him, has died in his arms before she can deliver it. Then Nick quarrels with Anne Hendrik, his lady love, over his insistence that he accompany Lord Westfield's men on their tour. If all that weren't enough, a deadly assassin is trailing the company. Like Ellis Peters, Marston mixes heavy doses of romance and mystery with his history and binds them together in the person of a very appealing hero.

There's a plethora of judicial mysteries on the docket at the moment, but this heavy caseload is carrying a few exceptional novels. One of them is Steve Martini's **Undue Influence** (Putnam, \$22.95), which makes this defense attorney Paul Madriani's third case in print. Madriani has recently lost his wife, who made him promise on her deathbed that he would look after her younger sister Nikki and Nikki's two children. That's how he finds himself in court the first time, offering moral support to Nikki as she battles her ex-husband and his new young wife for custody of the kids. A sudden turn of events puts Nikki in the dock again—this time on a charge of first-degree murder. Martini has created a very sympathetic character in Madriani, the courtroom stuff is super, and a twist ending doesn't hurt, either. Fans of courtroom mysteries should enjoy this as much as Martini's earlier *Prime Witness* and *Compelling Evidence*.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**P**sychoanalysis has long been a fertile ground for movie thrillers, with Hitchcock's *Spellbound* leading the way. In *Color of Night*, the latest psycho-thriller to sprout from Hollywood, Bruce Willis stars as a New York psychologist who's deeply troubled by the suicide of a patient.

Ever since that bloody day when a woman patient jumped out of his office window during treatment, Dr. Bill Capa has been unable to work. He quits his practice and heads for Los Angeles, where his friend Dr. Bob Moore (Scott Bakula) does group therapy and writes self-help bestsellers. As soon as he arrives, Bill sits in on one of the group sessions.

His friend has asked Bill to participate for a reason. He's been getting death threats, and he's convinced they're coming from someone in therapy. He's

counting on Bill's razor-sharp instincts to give him some insight into the group. Bill doesn't disappoint. Driving back to his pal's million dollar mansion in a Mercedes convertible, he offers his take on the alienated artist, the kleptomaniac nymphomaniac, the obsessive-compulsive, and the post-traumatic stress disorder victim.

But the insights are too little too late, and Bob is murdered in a sequence that makes the shower scene in *Psycho* look like a Disney movie. Unfortunately, no effort is spared to show graphic violence in this and in later scenes.

Bill reluctantly takes over the therapy group at the "suggestion" of the comically sarcastic L.A. cop in charge of the investigation (Ruben Blades). Soon he also stands in the killer's line of fire and winds up

not only investigating the murder of his friend, but trying to avoid his own premature demise.

In his spare time, Bill finds himself involved with a mysterious young woman who literally runs into him in a little "fender bender." The shapely, pouty-faced Rose (Jane March) is fond of surprising Capa—for instance, when he returns home late one night, she's in the kitchen whipping up dinner, wearing a frilly little apron and nothing else. Alas, the sex is as graphic and gratuitous in this movie as the violence.

While Bruce Willis is competent in his lead role, he does little to distinguish himself, though he manages to stay away from his usual smirks and wisecracks.

It's the members of the group who give this movie some pizzazz. And when Dr. Capa visits each one at home, we get some insight into each and some possible motives for Bob's murder.

Brad Dourif, nominated for an Academy Award as mental patient Billy Bibbit in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is memorable as an obsessive-compulsive lawyer who counts and recounts the number of books in his shrink's office. Lesley Ann Warren, as the bright-

eyed nymphomaniac, brightens up an otherwise dark film.

In fact, despite the Southern California oceanside locale, ninety percent of the movie takes place in numbingly dark interior sets or at night.

Director Richard Rush and screenwriters Matthew (*Consenting Adults*) Chapman and Billy Ray should take note: just because they've caused the audience to squint throughout much of their film, it doesn't mean they've created a viable *film noir*.

Ruben Blades, fresh from defeat in his election bid to become president of Panama, is victorious on the big screen with his light-hearted portrayal of the cop, who brings much needed humor to the scene.

This potentially taut psychological thriller is destroyed by heavy-handedness in its treatment of sex and violence. Before its release, there was a lot of publicity concerning the editing of several sex scenes from the film in order to avoid an X-rating. But while Hollywood Pictures (a division of Disney) achieved its desired R-rating, cutting more of the unclothed Willis and March and slicing out the gratuitous violence could have made this thriller a winner.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The August Mysterious Photo-Margaret Laybourn of Pocatons go to John L. Reilly of C. McPherson of Fort C. E. Delahanty of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada; Jessica Wade of Portland, Oregon; Charles Richard Laing of Newark, New Jersey; Bernice F. Weiss of Livingston, New Jersey; Sunnie Scarlett of San Antonio, Texas; Keith Mullins of Hilliard, Ohio; and John Dalbec of Canfield, Ohio.

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## DEAD RINGER by Margaret Laybourn

"Married at sea. Has a nice ring to it," Captain Narr said as his ship's chaplain rowed the small boat in the calm waters.

"Speaking of which, you have the ring, don't you?" his bride asked.

"Of course." Narr had pursued the precious ring that his grandfather had hidden for ten years before finding it. He had pursued Lady Klug as long as he had sought the ring. After he found it, Lady Klug had come around as well. His grandfather had been right, whoever possessed the ring was also blessed with good fortune.

The chaplain stopped rowing and performed the marriage ceremony. But no sooner had Captain Narr slipped the ring onto his new wife's finger than she shoved him over the side of the boat.

"I can't swim!" he protested. "Throw me a lifejacket!"

Both the chaplain and Lady Klug ignored him. Narr realized they were letting him drown so they could keep the ring. Fortunately, he had taken precautions by buying a similar ring from Home Shopping Club. Narr stopped thrashing in the water and pulled the authentic ring out of his jacket pocket. His grandfather had explained to him how it saved its wearer from danger. He put it on the little finger of his left hand. He twisted it three times clockwise.

This was strange, Narr thought. Maybe Grandfather meant the right hand. Maybe he meant counterclockwise. Maybe he meant four times. The possibilities were enough to keep him busy the rest of his life.



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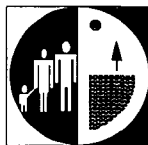
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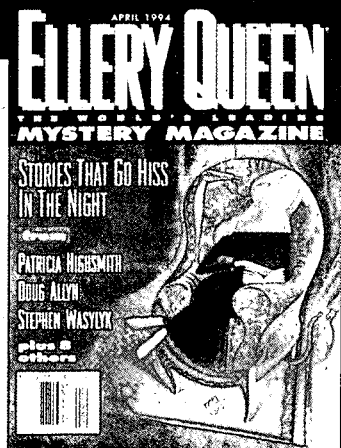
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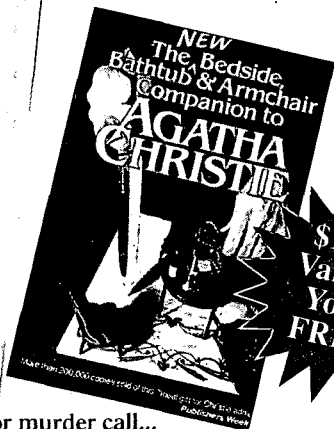
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